

Christians in Egypt

*Strategies and
Survival*

Andrea B. Rugh



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To Mme Ansaf Aziz

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Preface

While waiting for permission to study middle-class urban women in an Egyptian bureaucracy in 1976, I volunteered a few days a week in a mother-child clinic in a popular quarter of Cairo. My thought was to learn about women of other social classes before I studied educated civil servants. The clinic was in a Episcopal-run welfare center in a popular quarter of Cairo called Bulaq Abu Alaa, and the poor women were a clear contrast to the women I planned to study. They were uneducated, mostly unemployed, and lacked access to many of the normal necessities of life. As the permission process dragged on, I became increasingly involved in the Bulaq Center and began to shift my research interest to the Bulaq community itself. One puzzle was the amount of time these desperately poor women spent attending religious services and activities in a center that seemed to give them so little in return. Other questions arose about the importance of religion among the lower classes, and especially how Christians managed their relations with the Muslim majority in the quarter. Eventually I dropped the "women in bureaucracy" idea and turned to Bulaq.

Thus began a five-year, almost daily immersion in the lives of local residents as I accompanied the social worker in the performance of her duties at the center and when she routinely visited families in the community. Over these years, I came to know the community exceedingly well. The main clients were Christians, but we also occasionally visited Muslims in their homes or stopped casually to chat with them on street corners. Muslims enrolled in the center's literacy classes and signed up for knitting and sewing instruction. Some embroidered items that the center sold to Cairene customers at charity bazaars in other parts of town.

The social worker, Mme Ansaf, was the most fortuitous part of finding the center. She became a close friend and an avid researcher herself, devoting considerable time during and after working hours to making sure I understood all there was to know about life in Bulaq. When it was remotely possible, she instinctively knew it was better to "show" rather than "tell" me the answers to my questions. Together we travelled to visit her relatives in parts of Upper Egypt

from which many of our Bulaq clients came, giving me a better perspective on the changes they experienced when arriving as migrants in a city like Cairo.

I did not publish the manuscript on Bulaq at the time because, at the last minute, I decided that the issue of Christian-Muslim relations was too sensitive in the Egypt of the 1980s, and it would have been particularly provocative for a foreigner to write on such a subject. Already I experienced offended officials' criticisms of my observations as "those of a foreigner who was incapable of understanding Egyptian society." Officials took the stance that government services for the poor were adequate and that there were no tensions between the religious communities. Officials, for the most part, looked the other way when conflicts erupted in Upper Egyptian villages or in lower-class urban areas unless they escalated to a point where they threatened a major conflagration. Although the proximate causes tended to be disagreements over land or water or disputes over money and honor, the overlay of religious sensitivity in those days could magnify quarrels into major conflicts. If local residents didn't contain the problem quickly, the government eventually imposed an uneasy peace on the combatants while still claiming no problems existed. In this atmosphere of denial, the time was not ripe for a book describing what Muslims and Christians privately thought of one another or of the mechanisms they employed to keep a deceptive calm between their communities.

The second and more important reason for not publishing was the harm it might cause key characters in the study if their private views were exposed. There were few enough of them to be easily identifiable, and it was inconceivable to let those who opened their hearts and lives to me suffer the consequences of a virtually unregulated state security apparatus under Sadat and later Mubarak. In the 1970s, security forces were constantly suspicious of foreigners and Egyptians who associated with them. I explained the study carefully to Ansaf, but research being little understood at the time, the security forces probably saw me as a "charity worker" and mostly left me alone. As a result, my excursions into Bulaq were less scrutinized than those of independent researchers with a less obvious reason for being where they were. At least once I know of, Ansaf was called in for questioning about me, but whatever she said, they left me alone. I did, however, keep my tacit agreement with church officials to accompany Ansaf and not walk alone in an area that Egyptians considered dangerous because of drug traffickers and other illicit commerce that provided income for some Bulaq families.

The upshot was that I was reluctant to publish a book that would hurt Ansaf, others at the Bulaq Center, or members of the community. As a foreigner, I could perhaps get away with such a book, but Egyptians would have been highly critical of my exposing to international scrutiny the seamy side of Egyptian poverty or the tensions between Christians and Muslims. By the time

I finished the study, I was aware of how much such revelations might hurt those concerned.

After the 2011 Uprising in Egypt, the atmosphere changed. Christians had become an important part of the story, and their relations with Muslims were a portent of what many hoped the new Egypt might bring. By that time, 40 years later, many of the people connected to the Bulaq Center, both staff and clients, were gone or retired and people spoke more easily of Christian-Muslim relations and the importance of providing a better life for poor Egyptians. With the exception of Ansaf and the board members, however, I abbreviated or altered the names to make sure they remained anonymous.

One might ask if events that happened in the 1970s are still relevant—and I would answer very much so. In revising the manuscript, I added considerably more context material about the history of Coptic leaders' relations with Egyptian presidents up to and after the Uprising of 2011. The 1970s under President Sadat, when the study of Bulaq took place, proved to be one of the most difficult periods for Christians. The disastrous defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War caused many Egyptians to turn to formal religion as an answer to why God had deserted them in this devastating war. When Nasser died in 1970 and Sadat became president, he supported this religious revival by encouraging Islamists as a counterweight to his main threat, the Tagammu', a leftist party dominated by a leadership of articulate Egyptians mainly from the upper classes. Sadat's turn to Islam caused heightened anxiety for Christians generally and, in Bulaq, an increasing awareness of the potential for conflicts with Muslims with little hope the government would offer them protection.

This in-depth study of a poor community describes how growing unease affected a vulnerable group of Christians living in a mainly Muslim quarter of Cairo. It shows how they established a sense of religious community in the late 1970s and sought to regulate relations with their Muslim neighbors. The core of this community was a welfare center that worked both explicitly and implicitly to delineate sectarian boundaries and ensure relations between the communities remained cordial. In addition, the study shows the informal institutions in the quarter that helped defuse potentially disruptive behaviors of a few individuals, even while operating consistently within the frameworks of the communities' separate theologies and family issues. In surveying the literature on Egyptian Christians, I do not find any other studies that describe so comprehensively how poor, urban Christians organized and maintained a religious community nor how they managed their minority status in comparison to the strategies used by church authorities at the national level.

Another value in looking back is to observe the way interpersonal relations were conducted in the quarter at the time, with outsiders, with family members, and especially between the sexes. Just as sectarian tensions intensified after the

Uprising of 2011, so did gender tensions in both eras. The role of religion in a place like Bulaq, with the complicating factor of poverty, affected relationships in the 1970s and served as a backdrop for what came later in the Uprising of 2011.

I want to acknowledge the many people who talked through these ideas with me. Most of all, I want to thank my social-worker friend and her family who welcomed me so warmly. Ansaf became a sister to me in the best of all ways. For 30 years, I returned every year to Egypt to see her until she passed away in 2013, just days before I arrived for our annual visit. I owe her a debt of gratitude for taking such an active interest in teaching me during those years in Egypt.

I also want to acknowledge the insights provided by Reda Shafik Athanasios, who I met briefly when he was a young man in the 1970s in charge of youth activities in Bulaq. We met again 30 years later after he immigrated to the United States and became a successful businessman with a wife and two daughters. He enjoyed telling me how much Ansaf took advantage of me in promoting her agenda for the poor. My retort was always that she didn't use me any more than I used her in pursuing my research agenda, although I would rather characterize our collaboration as a happy "victimhood." I think we both knew what we were doing and each became committed to the other's goals.

Others who helped by providing information were Amal Morsy at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, and Dr. Nicholas Hopkins, emeritus professor of the American University of Cairo, who sent me census data gathered by Sayyid Uwais (1959) for his study comparing Bulaq and a Boston suburb. I had obtained basic census data in the 1970s, but my efforts to gather more details were frustrated by the Egyptian bureaucracy. Others also helped, including Dr. Emad Shahin, a professor at the American University in Cairo who read drafts of sections dealing with history and current events. Thanks go to my husband, Bill, who took the photos in the book, and to Vickie Baily for making them usable. I also owe my son Doug Rugh a debt of gratitude for providing the beautiful cover painting.

In the end, of course, I take responsibility for any errors that appear in the text.

Andrea B. Rugh, Garrett Park, Maryland

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Study Questions and the History of Christianity in Egypt

From the start of anthropology, the discipline was interested in religion. But taking their cues from archaeologists, anthropologists' first efforts were to catalogue religious artifacts so they could be used to compare and contrast societies and perhaps discover connections between them. At the time, religious artifacts were not thought to have much power in explaining how people coped with everyday living. Rather, they weakly reflected human ways of explaining the unexplainable while economic and political systems were far more determinative in shaping societies.

Later studies considered religion in more instrumental ways. Turner (1967) examined how people manipulated rituals and symbols in folk medicine and witchcraft to validate social structures. Geertz (1968) was fascinated by how historical and cultural influences in two widely separated settings—Indonesia and Morocco—drastically modified the practice of Islam. Spiro (1965) pointed out how “priesthoods” provided acceptable channels for deviant behaviors in some societies. Marxist-leaning social scientists saw religion as validating the structures of the status quo—the “opiate of the masses”—and constituting just another tool in the arsenal of the ruling classes to suppress the lower classes. As with other generalizations about the poor, these views minimize their capacity to use religion as a tool in advancing their own interests.

The main questions of this book ask how Christians deal with their status in a country of mainly Muslims: What strategies do they use and what are the implications of their choices. It addresses these questions at two levels: the first is the national political level, and the second is of a group of poor Christians living among a majority of Muslims in a lower-class quarter of Cairo, Bulaq Abu Alaa. The aim, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, was “to find in the

little what eludes [us] in the large, by stumbling upon general truths while sorting through special cases.”¹ The period in the late 1970s when the Bulaq part of the study was conducted was one of increasing pressure on Egyptian Christians, with Bulaq Christians being no exception. The study shows how vulnerable Christians turned to a welfare center where, supported by more affluent Christians, they managed to maintain largely peaceful albeit uneasy relations with their Muslim neighbors.

The book asks a number of questions with bearing on the way minorities cope with their vulnerabilities: At the national level, what strategies do church authorities use to advance Christian interests? How does the church hierarchy interact with the Egyptian government? Which national policies affect Christians for better or worse? In Bulaq, the questions are somewhat different: What caused Christians to become members of a religious community? What kinds of boundaries did they draw between themselves and their Muslim neighbors, and in what realms of life were they especially eager to maintain a separation? Where did they cross those boundaries? How did they contain potential conflicts within and between their communities? Was there any difference in the way Christians and Muslims coped with conditions in Bulaq? What was the emotional content of Muslim-Christian personal relations? How did religion impact their state of poverty and vice versa? Was it true that “religion was the opiate of the masses”—that it kept the poor mostly acquiescing to their social conditions and unlikely to make any effort to change them? What did Christian ways of coping on both levels tell us about minority strategies in general and about changes in the public posture of Christians during and after the Egyptian Uprising² of 2011?

The historical parts rely mainly on secondary sources and, more recently, newspaper accounts. The ethnographic study of Bulaq uses the standard anthropological techniques of holism and participant observation. Holism assumes that any aspect that touches on a subject may be important—its history, its organization, its personnel, its institutions—and virtually any entry point into the topic can lead to a better understanding of it. Participant observation assumes that the best way to know a subject is for a researcher to immerse himself or herself as much as possible into the subject-matter itself. Over five years, between 1976 and 1981, with the exception of holidays, I spent most days of the week in Bulaq shadowing a social worker, Mme Ansaf, as she supervised the affairs of the Bulaq Social Welfare Center and made her rounds of roughly 250 families. For the most part, I remained a quiet observer watching what took place and leaving the initiative to Mme Ansaf. My Arabic at the time was good enough to understand most of the conversations around me, but when I missed something, Ansaf, whose English was limited, summarized what I could not understand and often explained the implicit messages she felt I might have

missed. After five years, people's responses became so familiar to me that I could pretty much predict how they would respond in most situations or at least know when their behaviors deviated enough from the norm to warrant further investigation—in other words, I had absorbed their ways of behaving into a deeper level of my own understanding. When I asked about people or behaviors, Ansaf would usually say, “We will go and ask,” and consequently, despite the important role Ansaf played in the research, I felt enough occurred in our daily excursions to corroborate any information I learned from her. To back up our observations, we collected basic information from the Christians that frequented the Bulaq Center, including among other pieces of information, the relationships of those who lived together, their marriages, their education levels, and where possible, their income levels.

In addition to trailing Ansaf in Bulaq, I spent considerable time with her visiting other institutions and organizations that provided services for the poor, including orphanages, homes for the elderly, medical clinics, hospitals, informal practitioners dispensing cures for physical and mental problems, and government offices that dealt with pensions, official IDs, and other documents. The government provided few services to the poor, and it was only with dread that people approached public offices, fearing the disrespect they would encounter there and the likelihood that their requests would be denied.

Does this book about Christians and Muslims unduly present the perspective of Christians who at best only constitute roughly 10 percent of the Egyptian population? Yes, without a doubt. A method like participant observation demands trust as a prerequisite for acquiring candid information. My presumed Christian faith made it easier for Christians to open up to me, just as it was easier for me as a woman to spend time with women who were the main participants in the Christian-supported center. I never felt I lost my “foreign-ness,” but its raw edges were smoothed somewhat by my “passports”: as a woman among women, as a presumed Christian among Christians, and as a vouchsafed companion of Mme Ansaf. These traits, after a time, secured me a place as a “partial insider” who people felt would not betray their trust. I could not have matched this level of trust in the Muslim community where I was not a presumed Muslim and where men dominated most institutions of organized religion.

Egyptian Christians have faced challenges over the years from the state and from non-Christians. Despite denominational differences within their group (Copts, Catholics, Protestants, Episcopalians, and others), Egyptian Christians share a collective memory of their history, especially the difficult times. This book briefly surveys this history and then zooms in on one group of Christians during the troublesome period in the 1970s, suggesting why they might have

a residual wariness today as they contemplate modern political upheavals and their continuing future within a Muslim-majority country.

The following section sets the scene by looking at the history of Christianity in Egypt and describing the proliferation of Christian denominations that resulted in large part from the penetration of foreign missionaries. The chapter ends with a review of the Coptic Orthodox Church's relations with various governments since independence in 1952 and up to the 1970s. The emphasis on the Coptic Orthodox Church here is because Copts represent 95 percent of Christians in Egypt, and what happens to them on the national level basically sets the stage for Egyptian Christians of all denominations. The Bulaq Center's clientele was almost exclusively Coptic; the main material support came from the Egyptian Episcopal Church, and center staff included Episcopalians, Evangelical Protestants, and Copts.

Christianity in Egypt

Tradition claims that Christianity came to Egypt in earnest when St. Mark settled in Alexandria in the first century of the Common Era.³ From Alexandria, the Christian doctrine spread through the Delta and along the Nile until, by the fourth century, it was entrenched throughout the area of Egypt today. Eventually it came to be seen as the religion of the indigenous people as opposed to the imported religions of the Greek and Roman conquerors. The word "Copt," by which the Egyptians Christians were known, derives from the Greek word "Aigiptos," meaning Egyptian. The Coptic alphabet uses several Pharaonic characters that Copts claim as evidence of their continuity with the ancient Egyptians. Modern Copts do not like to be referred to as Christians, since they believe the word "Copt" encompasses the meaning Christian and Egyptian.⁴ In the text, when the reference is to Copts or the Coptic Church, it is Orthodox Copts that are meant.

Coptic history was constantly being affected by relations with other groups. During its spread up the Nile, Christianity was met with Greek and Roman persecution, a fact that shaped some of its most important features even now. Monasticism and withdrawal into the desert became a means of escaping persecution and a heavy taxation imposed by outside rulers. Martyrdom and monkhood formed the ultimate expression of faith and an uncompromising adherence to principle.⁵ The cross on which Jesus suffered became the Coptic symbol of solidarity.

By the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the accepted religion of the entire Roman Empire—in Egypt reaching its peak in missionary zeal and centers of learning. There was a brief period of consolidation before the Egyptian Church broke with international Christianity in 451 CE at the Council of

Chalcedon. The dispute was over the nature of Christ. Orthodox Copts took the position that although Christ had two natures, the divine and the human, these became united in the mystery of the Incarnation⁶ rather than remaining separate. Egyptian Christians who took the latter view remained part of the Byzantine-dominated Catholic Church. This difference continues to distinguish the Coptic Orthodox Church from other Christian denominations.

Ultimately, the worst blow to Coptic interests came with the Arab⁷ Islamic conquest of Egypt. When Amr ibn al-‘As, acting for the Caliph Umar, invaded Egypt in 639 CE, he found a country almost entirely populated by Christians. Some of these Christians at first welcomed the invaders whom they hoped would relieve them of their Byzantine rulers. Although the Byzantines were also Christian, they viewed local Christians as heretics after their split from the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Muslim invaders introduced a new religion into Egypt that they considered an improvement on the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity.

Although 90 percent of Egyptians were Christians at the time of the Islamic invasion,⁸ three centuries later the majority were Muslim, and by the fourteenth century, Christians constituted only a tenth of the Egyptian population.⁹ Arabic replaced Coptic as the language of public affairs in the eighth century and, although Copts continued to speak the Coptic language for a time, by the twelfth century it was largely unknown outside of church liturgy. As a spoken language, it ceased altogether by the seventeenth century.

During the sixteenth century, the Ottomans conquered Egypt and established a system of government that essentially allowed protected non-Muslims (*dhimmis*) to govern themselves.¹⁰ The system delineated communities by ethnic/religious affiliation and appointed local authorities to administer their own communities under the supervision of the rulers. Boundaries between the communities were established through separate legal and social structures that made the development of a single homogeneous civil state virtually impossible. As non-Muslims, Christians paid a tax (*jizya*) that was supposed to entitle them to the services of the state and to guarantee them the right to follow their own religion. The comparable tax for Muslims was *zakat* or the proportional amount of their income that Muslims paid annually for the poor. Although popes at the time acted as religious and communal leaders, they relied on *archons* or Christian elites to collect the *jizya* and the wealthy of the community to make up any shortfalls owed the state. These tax collectors eventually became more powerful than the pope himself, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century and the reigns of Popes Cyril VI and Shenouda III that the balance of power shifted from the laity to the church.¹¹ By that time, the church had been severely weakened.

Christians and Jews, however, continued to feel like second-class citizens under the Ottoman system. But the system set a pattern that, in some essentials, remains today. Ethnic residential units still exist by choice in some villages and neighborhoods, although no longer as distinctly as before, and separate legal structures still require people to identify a religious affiliation in matters of personal-status law.¹²

The increased foreign influence in Egypt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries intensified Christian differences with the Muslim community as well as creating fissures in the Coptic community. During French occupation (1798–1801), Roman Catholic missionaries promoted the Roman Catholic branch of the Coptic Church that had existed for several centuries. They found, as did later waves of foreign missionaries, that it was easier to make converts from among local Christians than from the Muslim community. The resistance of Muslims was buttressed by several practices—in particular the severe penalties for apostasy (converting away from Islam) and the prohibitions against Muslim women (but not Muslim men) marrying into other faiths. Under Egyptian legal codes, children followed the faith of their fathers and wives inherited only if they were of the same faith as their husbands. These prohibitions prevented members from leaving the Muslim community while encouraging the intake of members from other communities. As a result, missionaries in Egypt found it nearly impossible to convert members of the Muslim faith to Christianity.

After the French departure, under the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805–49) and members of his dynasty, Christians enjoyed a relative prosperity. In asserting his independence from Ottoman control, Muhammad Ali abolished the system of separate administrative units and the *jizya* tax. Muhammad Ali also permitted and, in some cases, encouraged Western missionaries to work in the country. The Westerners' contacts with local Copts produced new divisions and conversions. The Church Missionary Society of England (Anglican) started schools for Copts in 1825 but discontinued their work in 1862 under a successor of Muhammad Ali who was suspicious of foreign influence. They resumed work in Egypt in 1882 with the advent of British occupation and set up four parishes (three in Cairo) for their local converts and foreign congregations, about 750 members in all.

During the British occupation (1882–1945), conditions improved for Christians—at the expense of Muslims. Muslim Ottoman rule was replaced with what was essentially Western Christian rule, even when at the end of this period, local figureheads gave the appearance of local Egyptian governance. Although Western missionaries were already well established, the British administrators encouraged them to expand their efforts to “uplift” the poor rural and lower-class urban communities. In 1925 in an effort to reduce tensions with local Muslims, the Charter of the Episcopal Church in Egypt, as

the local Anglican Church was called, announced that it was not interested in gaining converts.¹³

Meanwhile, American missionaries began work in Egypt in 1854, intent on reforming the Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1899, the United Presbyterian Church of America began work in Egypt, successfully winning over a number of Copts to its denomination.¹⁴ This group, known first as The Synod of the Nile, later became the independent Egyptian Evangelical Church and eventually the Coptic Evangelical Church. The Americans put much of their effort into establishing schools in Upper Egypt.¹⁵ These schools became increasingly popular up until independence, when they lost some of their importance after Nasser required that all private schools conform to government curriculum and standards. Eventually, the compulsory free public school system reduced demand for these schools.

In 1950 shortly before independence, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) was established with headquarters in Cairo. CEOSS started with literacy courses, leadership training, and income-generating programs serving both Muslims and Christians. In the mid-1970s, they developed a strong presence in Upper Egypt with their new headquarters in Minya. Throughout the next several decades, they added programs very similar to those being promoted by the international community: community development and poverty alleviation (1980s), gender equity (1993), strengthening community-based organizations (2000), changing from needs- to rights-based programs (2005), children at risk (2007), and farmers' cooperatives (2010). Observers have noted that these Evangelical programs often served as the inspiration for reform programs in the Coptic Orthodox Church, especially in the 1980s.

Also after independence with the revival of nationalism, some of the Christian elites who joined "foreign" denominations returned to the Coptic Orthodox Church because of its more indigenous roots and because the reforms of Pope Cyril were making that Church more attractive.¹⁶ British missionaries mostly left at independence, while many American missionary groups continued their education and welfare activities until the 1967 War when they also left.

Muslims were usually free to attend the health and education services established by missionaries, but Christian parents naturally felt more comfortable sending their children to missionary schools where they came in close contact with Christians of other persuasions. When the British expanded Egypt's civil service,¹⁷ Christians were often more qualified than Muslims as a result of studying in these church schools. Once Christians got a foothold in "educated" posts, they tended to recommend relatives and friends for vacancies that opened up. Long after the British were gone, this bias continued in many of the international organizations that survived the period. From this experience, the Muslim

community understandably became wary of foreign proselytizing and resented Christians' advantages under the British.

By midcentury, at the time of independence, Muslims had become deeply suspicious of the motives of missionaries, and the government began imposing restrictions on their proselytizing activities. Egyptian Christians from faiths originated by foreign groups suddenly found it advantageous to link themselves in name to the indigenous Coptic Orthodox Church by, for example, calling themselves Coptic Evangelicals or Coptic Episcopalians. After the 1967 War with Israel, most of the remaining foreign missionaries left Egypt.

As history shows, from the time preceding the Islamic invasion when virtually the entire population was Coptic, the church suffered conversions and schisms until it was a shadow of its original size.¹⁸ Most of the original conversions were to Islam but later many were to other Christian denominations. Numbers are disputed, but the usual estimate for Egyptian Christians is 10 percent of a total population of more than 85 million, fewer than church claims of 16 percent.

By the end of the twentieth century, the rough breakdown of Christian denominations was the following: Orthodox Copts, 95 percent or roughly 7 million members; Coptic Catholics, 3 percent or 161,000; Greek Orthodox, 0.5 percent or 40,000; and the rest of the denominations much smaller fractions. Evangelicals (Protestants) comprised only an estimated 27,000 members of which only about 1,000–5,000 were Episcopalians. The overwhelming size of the Coptic Orthodox Church in relation to other Christian denominations has given it the lead role in negotiating with the government and speaking out on Christian issues.

The Changing Fortunes of Christians since Independence¹⁹

To understand the significance of current events for Egyptian Christians, we must look briefly at their changing fortunes from the time of Egypt's independence in 1952 up to the time of Sadat, when the Bulaq study was conducted. This story continues in a later chapter when we look at the years from the 1980s up to the Uprising of 2011 and beyond. These experiences shed light on changes that occurred in the public stance of Christians after the Uprising of 2011.

In the decades after Egyptian independence in 1952, Christians experienced roller coaster changes in their relations with the government. With the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Coptic Orthodox Church through its Pope Cyril VI (1959–71) established warm relations with the president and in return was rewarded with such benefits as receiving government support for building churches and being allowed to vet Christian appointments to official positions.

The church prospered under Cyril's initiatives of promoting social work, helping the poor, establishing village ministries, and developing Bible studies and a Sunday school curriculum.

One consequence of the close relationship between Cyril and the president was that the church became the main representative of the Christian community, pushing aside other lay and civil society groups²⁰ that had been influential prior to independence. President Nasser helped this process along by issuing a presidential decree in 1957 stating age and other requirements that essentially eliminated younger reform-minded members of the clergy from being elected pope. Tadros notes that by strengthening the church against its civil society groups "religious affiliation became the Copts' main marker, not their citizenship." No lay institutions remained after this with enough power to press "the church for greater accountability, transparency and reform."²¹

Several other changes affected Christians during the Nasser period: First, an attempt on Nasser's life in 1954 by elements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood led Nasser to crack down on that organization—an action that Christians saw as benefitting their community. Second, in 1953, Nasser began implementing the land reforms he had promised when coming to power.²² The reforms, which broke up many large plantations, were particularly devastating to Christian landowning families in Upper Egypt and to the Christian peasants they employed. Many of the latter migrated for work and ended up in crowded popular quarters of major Egyptian cities. Also in the name of reform, in the early 1960s, Nasser nationalized much of the industrial, financial, and economic sectors including properties, hospitals, and other assets²³ of nongovernmental organizations, many of which belonged to Christian groups.

Another of Nasser's promises was to expand education for all children, regardless of their class or residence in urban and rural areas. His government, however, neglected the necessary investment to meet the vastly increasing enrollments, ultimately leading to overcrowded classrooms, inadequately prepared teachers, and eventually to inferior public education programs. Demand for education was accelerated by Nasser's promise of government jobs to graduates of the public universities,²⁴ making education the one secure route to higher class status. Previously, Egypt had had what was essentially a two-class system consisting of an affluent class of rich landowners and businessmen and a lower class of laborers on farms and in factories or as underemployed manual laborers engaged in pick-up work. With the expansion of education, a middle class emerged comprising the educated children of lower-class families who preferred respectable, albeit poorly paid, government office jobs rather than manual labor. Eventually the government bureaucracy was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of these poorly prepared graduates. By virtue of their numbers, the jobs went mostly to Muslims who, after the British were gone, disproportionately

occupied supervisory jobs and key positions in Nasser's government. Christians no longer held the advantage of their often higher educational status and what many felt was preferential treatment under the British.

Perhaps the most important impact of the Nasser era on Christians came from Egypt's devastating defeat by the Israelis in the Six Day War of June 1967. Many credit that defeat with accelerating an Islamic revival in Egypt. Egyptians were abandoned by God, it was said, because they deviated so drastically from Islam, and if they wanted to regain His favor, they must return to proper Islamic practice. It was no secret that many affluent Egyptians in the 1950s and 1960s took to emulating Western dress, drinking alcohol, and promiscuity, and espousing "atheistic" socialist and Marxist ideals. A return to Islam meant reviving a more indigenous way of life, marked by conservative dress and behavior and regular observance of religious obligations: daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage. Universities became the breeding ground for this more conservative and often more radical Islam, especially among poor rural students living away from home for the first time. On holidays, they brought their views back to already conservative villages. Feeling theirs was the correct religion, these students put a religious spin on even the most insignificant of sectarian conflicts. Christians suddenly became more visible because of their "non-Islamic" dress and because they did not observe Muslim holidays and practices.

Under duress, Egyptian Christians, particularly those in Protestant and Episcopalian denominations, tended to stress their Western connections. However, when relations soured²⁵ between Nasser and the United States, leading Nasser to cut relations in 1967, Christians found it better to downplay their Western connections and stress their links to the indigenous Coptic faith by calling themselves Coptic Evangelicals or Coptic Catholics. Orthodox Copts who claimed origins dating to before the Islamic invasion continued to emphasize their Egyptian origins.

When Nasser died in 1970 and Pope Cyril died a year later, the close relationship between church and state was broken. The new president, Anwar Sadat, attempted to develop a similarly close relationship with the new Pope Shenouda III and at first gave him the same opportunity to vet Christian candidates for the People's Assembly and approved a larger number of church constructions—always a contentious issue for Christians.²⁶ Tadros says there were three reasons relations broke down: the rise of Islamist groups, increased sectarian clashes, and the growing role of Coptic American emigrants in criticizing Sadat's policies from abroad.²⁷ What led President Sadat to support Islamists, often at the expense of Christians? At the start of his presidency, Sadat inherited the Soviet/Russian presence that Nasser had encouraged in his later years when he broke with the West. But with the economy at a low point, Sadat decided to reverse

Nasser's policy and declare an "Open Door" (*Infitah*) economic initiative that allowed resumption of trade and investment with Western countries, and in 1974, he resumed diplomatic relations with the United States. In taking these initiatives, he had been motivated by the fear of opposition coming from the remnants of the Egyptian Nasserites and Communists. To counter this threat from the left, Sadat began actively encouraging the growing religiosity of Muslims. In October 1973, when Egyptian troops stormed the Israeli defenses on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, inflicting considerable initial damage and holding on to their gains for a few hours, it seemed a vindication of Egyptians' renewed commitment to Islam. The battle, symbolically code-named "Badr," the first battle in Islam, with its battle cry "Allahu Akhbar," took place during the month of Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic year. Although the Egyptian army was soon defeated, Sadat nonetheless claimed it a major victory for the Egyptian people and their commitment to their Muslim faith.

In 1977, driven by the country's severe economic distress and massive bread riots and feeling empowered by his "victory" in the Sinai, Sadat flew to Israel and offered to end the depleting state of war with that country. This move was lauded by the international press but was extremely unpopular with Egyptians, especially radical Muslims who saw it as a caving in to the Israeli enemy. In 1978, negotiations at Camp David ended with Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel signing a peace agreement that seemed to vindicate the risk Sadat had taken. After the agreements were signed, Sadat turned against the Islamists who had criticized him and imprisoned large numbers of them.

Meanwhile the Coptic pope, Shenouda III, was increasingly unhappy with the way things were going for Christians.²⁸ He blamed Sadat for encouraging Islamic extremism and for doing little to curb the increasing violence against Christians between 1977 and 1981, especially in Upper Egypt and often with police standing by and not intervening. In another effort to appease Islamists, Sadat amended the constitution to say that shari'a law was the principal source of legislation,²⁹ further aggravating Christians who wondered how the ruling would affect their own personal-status laws. In addition, Pope Shenouda expressed strong disapproval of Sadat's trip to Israel, which he believed should have been part of an overall peace agreement in the Middle East that included the Palestinian issue.³⁰ One small but telling act at the time was that Sadat's government understated the percentage of Christians in Egypt in the 1976 census as 6.3 percent rather than the 10 or 15 percent claimed by the church, as if to point out their insignificance in relation to the Egyptian population as a whole.

As fundamentalism among Muslims increased, Pope Shenouda also encouraged Christian fundamentalism within the Coptic Church with a highly politicized and activist orientation. He himself frequently spoke out publicly on Christian issues. In 1980, he took the highly publicized act of cancelling Easter

celebrations in protest against acts of violence perpetrated against Christians and changes in the laws intended to Islamize the society. The last straw came in 1981 with a massacre of Christians in a poor quarter of Cairo. When the Pope complained, Sadat retaliated by rescinding the decree recognizing Shenouda as the head of the Coptic Church and, in September, banished him to the Monastery of Saint Bishoi. At the same time, he imprisoned eight bishops and 24 priests along with a number of Coptic notables.³¹ A month later on October 6, 1981, Sadat was assassinated by a radical Islamist group that objected to his trip to Israel. All in all, Sadat's presidency was a low point for Egyptian Christians because of the increased attacks on their community by militant Islamists and because of Sadat's strained relations with the pope.

Summary

This chapter has set the stage for an examination of Christian interests in Egypt. It has laid out the study questions and methodology and provided a brief history of Christianity in Egypt to show its declining membership and the early patterns of monasticism and withdrawal employed by Christians faced with external threats. It showed the ups and downs of church-state relations from independence in 1952 to the Sadat presidency in the 1970s, when the Bulaq part of the study was conducted, stressing the importance of the relationship between the heads of state and popes.

CHAPTER 2

The Origins of Bulaq and the Social Welfare Center

Even a cursory acquaintance with Bulaq—the dense popular quarter slightly north of Cairo’s famous Tahrir (Independence) Square—suggests a long and complicated history that bears on its character today. The Bulaq Center is an extension of this past history.

Bulaq’s Origins

The historian Stanley Lane-Poole tells how Bulaq came into being after the sinking in the Nile of the ship *Elephantine* in the early thirteenth century.¹ Subsequent silting downstream from the accident produced a number of islands, one of which became Bulaq.

In the early fourteenth century, Sultan al Nasir encouraged wealthy citizens to build winter homes and palaces along the banks of Bulaq. Construction of permanent residences and small industries intensified until, by the fifteenth century, Bulaq had become the main port for the city of Cairo, reaching its zenith during the heyday of the world spice trade. As this trade declined over the next three centuries, however, Bulaq’s fortunes suffered proportionately.

The first half of the nineteenth century, under the ruler Muhammad Ali, brought a renewed florescence to Bulaq as he attempted to modernize Egypt’s economy. He chose nearby Shubra for his own palace and transformed Bulaq into an industrialized area. In 1820, Bulaq possessed an iron foundry, a boat construction industry, textile spinning mills, a bleach plant, and a national press. Nearby, Muhammad Ali built schools of civil engineering, agriculture, and veterinary science. The original conflict over whether Bulaq should be a commercial or residential area was resolved during this time in favor of commerce.² Coptic Christians featured prominently in port areas, such as Bulaq, as scribes, accountants, and customs collectors.³

In 1800, during their conquest of Egypt (1798–1801), the French burnt much of the Bulaq port while it was still virtually an island. To ease transportation, they built a raised causeway from Azbekiya a few miles away to near the island of Bulaq. Up until the 1830s, carriages were uncommon in Egypt and therefore a poor road system was not an insurmountable burden. But by the 1840s, canals were being built to drain the unhealthy marshy areas surrounding Bulaq, and the area finally became contiguous with the mainland.⁴ By the twentieth century, Bulaq's port functions waned, moving north to Rawd al Farag while many small industries and warehouses for bulky goods remained in Bulaq.

By 1800, most Christians resided in or near the northwest corner of the city that incorporated Bulaq and Shubra. The spaces between the large residences built by wealthy government officials in Bulaq in the fourteenth century had slowly filled with buildings until, by the nineteenth century, there was virtually no room left for construction. By the end of the first half of the twentieth century, Bulaq finally and irrevocably changed from the quiet, mixed residential and commercial area it had been to the crowded run-down quarter it is today. By the 1950s, its density was 43,936 persons per square mile and the numbers continued to grow.⁵ The large, previously single-family dwellings were subdivided numerous times to accommodate the influx of lower-class rural migrants arriving from the south, and by the 1960s, it was rare to find a single-family dwelling anywhere in the quarter. Still to be found in the 1970s, scattered among the residential blocks fronting the same nineteenth-century dirt pathways, were dilapidated remains of large and small industrial complexes.

Bulaq in the 1970s

When I went to work in Bulaq in 1976, the quarter felt different from other neighborhoods in Cairo. Although perhaps as grimy and industrial as many, the attached buildings still possessed an air of old elegance in their substantial facades and cornices. Lane after lane of dilapidated row houses lined the unpaved roads—no more than footpaths in many places. Their low profile, usually not more than four or five stories, seemed smaller because of the mud, garbage, and other debris that over time raised the street level in some areas to where anyone entering the ground floor had to step down a foot or two. During the time when the Nile raised ground water in low-lying areas of Bulaq,⁶ residents on the ground floor had to lay planks across concrete blocks to stay above the water level.

Vehicular traffic was not meant for most streets in Bulaq, explaining why when USAID provided large dump trucks to improve Cairo's sanitation, Bulaq's smaller streets could not be conveniently served. Although the donkey carts of the Christian garbage collectors from Mokattam Hills could easily have penetrated Bulaq, the distance and the quality of the garbage didn't interest them, and consequently

heaps of garbage filled empty lots and street corners and contributed to the smell that, along with the sewage and poor sanitation, permeated the air of the quarter. It was a smell I got used to, but it clung to my clothes until washed.

On either side of the narrow alleyways and only a few meters apart, opposing rows of houses cast a cooling shade that completed the sense of Bulaq as a warren of tunnels. The oldest houses, scattered randomly throughout the quarter, were built solidly of stone foundations and walls, reflecting the time when they were spacious single family dwellings. More recent constructions filling in the gaps were made of less durable sun-dried or imperfectly kiln-dried brick or sometimes more costly cement block. Population pressures in the 1950s and 1960s inspired additional layers of living space in the form of shacks banged together from tin ghee cans and scavenged materials and located on the flat roofs of buildings. Most buildings were usually subdivided into one- or two-room apartments with residents sharing a single toilet in the stairwell.

A superficial impression of Bulaq was one of disorder at best and chaos at worst until the informal patterns became apparent. On the chaotic side, washing hung from clotheslines connected across roadways and dripped on passersby below. Balconies and rooftops were packed with broken furniture, old tires, and nondescript metal objects that might prove useful someday. Goats, chickens, ducks, and geese shared living space with their human owners or occupied rooftop “yards” where it was harder for them to escape. On the orderly side, residents daily swept the thoroughways directly in front of their doors and threw out their dishwater to settle the dust. Garbage was piled in out-of-the-way corner lots until it sometimes reached the second floor of adjoining buildings or higher. Children picked through the scraps for shreds of paper and wood to fuel their mothers’ baking ovens. It was undeniably an orderly system and one that might easily have lent itself to efficient garbage collection if it had been available.

From morning until evening, Bulaq hummed in a steady cacophony of human and animal sounds. But at night, it became a ghost town with shutters drawn and only the occasional light of a kerosene lamp or a single light bulb escaping through drawn shutters. Bulaq was a family quarter where men and women retired early after a day of work. Only the coffee shops stayed open late with customers sipping sweet teas or thick coffees and smokers puffing dreamily at their shishas.

Shops filled the ground floor of residences in the main streets, much as they did in earlier centuries when each section of the city was largely self-sufficient. The small stores offered goods that met most of the immediate needs of the residents: withered vegetables and fruits; such staples as tomatoes, beans, salt, onions, and garlic; and of course, candies and cigarettes. There were sweet shops and bakeries, tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, dyers, barbers, rugmakers recycling bits of cloth into rag rugs, secondhand furniture shops, and small hardware dealers.



Figure 2.1 A barber gives his customer a shave in a side street



Figure 2.2 Bottled drink vendors on a main street in Bulaq



Figure 2.3 The bread delivery man

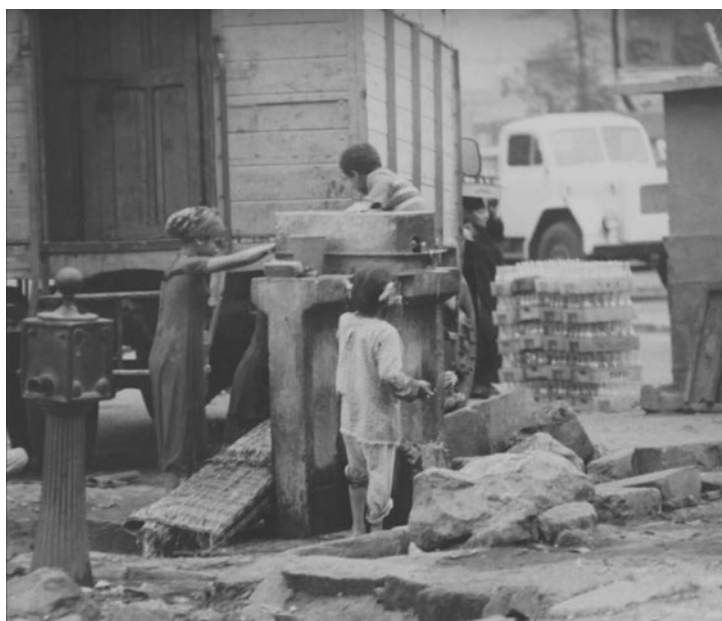


Figure 2.4 Filling canisters at a public faucet

Echoing from nearby coffee shops was the almost constant click-clack of backgammon pieces and wafting through the air the sweet smell of hashish.

For children, there was the familiar sight of an old woman who, for a few piasters, made her dog perform tricks. Children could rent bicycles or take turns on a small swing set erected in an open area. On special occasions, a carnival with larger swings and other exciting rides set up shop on the edge of Bulaq. For a pittance in the spring, children could watch the wonderfully skilled hully-gully man perform his magic show in a park not far away. Another popular showman was the one who walked the streets with his portable 3-D peepshow.

Mobile venders were a constant in the main streets of Bulaq, hawking ready-cooked food such as *kushiri* (a rice or pasta and sauce dish), chickpeas in lemon and salt, fried *tamiya*, fresh fruits and vegetables for the housewife, and kerosene for cookers and lamps. Others performed services such as mattress fluffing, pot tinning, knife sharpening, or taking clients' goats daily to graze on the garbage. Also with his well-known cry "*rubia vecchia*," the secondhand man collected and sold old clothes and household goods. Life in Bulaq was never boring, and for children without adult responsibilities, it was always full of excitement.

On the edge of Bulaq where wider streets permitted the passage of motor cars, "modern" businesses flourished: ironworks, welding shops, auto body workshops, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, and other skilled and unskilled workers. Like shops in the interior of Bulaq, these industries remain small scale and family owned. Their fortunate location near some of Cairo's major arteries made for a booming business in auto repairs and other skilled work. Not all residents of Bulaq were poor, therefore, but almost all at the time were lower class, which meant illiterate or only barely literate. Some of the "richest" residents owned the workshops or shops in the nearby Wikalt-al-Balad, a nearby shopping area. Parents considered themselves lucky if they could secure apprenticeships for their teenage sons in these *wurshas*, where they acquired practical skills that were much better than the theoretical skills learned in technical schools.

A few Bulaq Center members also lived in adjacent Qulali, a transitional area compared with lower-class Bulaq or more middle-class Shubra to the north. Bulaq had many dwellings with no running water, where it was necessary for their residents to make daily trips to public faucets that were often out of order and invariably situated in the middle of garbage heaps. Most Qulali homes, by contrast, were equipped with at least one faucet, and the buildings in general looked newer and less crowded, with more spacious designs and one or more stories than the homes in Bulaq. Businesses in Qulali were also on a grander scale, catering to more affluent customers. One restaurant made large quantities of *kushiri* daily that were sold off of hand carts in nearby streets. Qulali even had a beauty parlor for those who had money to spend on frivolities.



Figure 2.5 Lunch time at the *kushbiri* stand



Figure 2.6 Buying drinks from the *irq-issous* man

The streets in Qulali, although unpaved as in Bulaq, were usually wide enough to accommodate cars. And the dress of the inhabitants differed. The standard “village” dress of robes (*gallabiyas*) for men and black overdresses and shawls for women in Bulaq were mixed with more “modern” dress in Qulali—suit jackets and shirts for men and pant suits or dresses for women in office jobs.

A measure of the difference in these two areas was apparent in density figures. According to the 1960 census, Adawiya, the most densely populated district in Bulaq and the one with the largest share of Bulaq Center members, contained almost 270,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, while Qulali contained less than 70,000. The differences between Bulaq and Qulali were perhaps not so large when compared with differences between these areas and others in Cairo, but Bulaq consistently attracted members of the lower classes, while Qulali also had its share of families with a more middle-class lifestyle.

The Bulaq Social Welfare Center

In the 1970s, there were two buildings associated with the Episcopal Church’s social welfare activities in Bulaq. The first was a dilapidated five-story building on Ramses Street⁷ at the edge of Bulaq that, from its elegant façade, suggested a greater prominence in the past. By the 1970s, it had a more modest role as the main office of the Bulaq Welfare Center. In it were housed the preschool program and the apartment of the Episcopal priest-in-charge and his wife, as well as stores of commodities: cooking oil, powdered milk, and other goods that had been donated to the program. Next door, dwarfing the center, was a large multistoried building that contained the offices of the main government *Al-Ahram* newspaper. Several reporters I knew had offices that looked down on the streets of Bulaq, and they often asked me what was going on there as if it were some sort of alien country. They believed it was unsafe to set foot in the area, and as one who had Marxist leanings joked, “You make a better communist than I do,” and offered me membership in the Party.

Down an alleyway not far from the Ramses office was a more modest two-story building that, in its shabbiness, blended in with adjacent structures. This building, being more accessible to the local residents, housed the main welfare activities of the Episcopal Church, including the health-related clinics, literacy and sewing classes, religious services, and once a week, a hot meal program. The activities in this modest building were presided over by Mme Ansaf, the social worker in charge who had risen to her position through hard work and dedication.

The Center's Origins

The Bulaq Social Welfare Center was founded in 1925 by Sam Morrison, who was the secretary of the British Anglican Church's Missionary Society (CMS) in Egypt.⁸ The center began as a baby welfare clinic in the mornings and a class for boys in the afternoon. Administrators in the 1970s told me it had also housed the first athletic club for lower-class boys in Egypt, training champions in such sports as weight lifting and boxing. A church pamphlet from that period described the difficulties of starting a center in Bulaq, which was "known to be a den of thieves and of robbers and of men addicted to the smoking of opium and Hashish." Local people thought the outsiders (who at the time were mainly British) were spies and reportedly stoned the "lady charity workers" when they first appeared. But eventually, the pamphlet says, the inhabitants "realized that the motive for establishing the Club and Welfare Center was to help the people in the area" and "those who had been unfriendly at first became their greatest friends."⁹ Local people in this case referred to Muslims who were the center's main clients.

During the pre-Nasser years of British occupation, the center's work continued to be implemented primarily by British members of the Anglican Church. A study of Christian Missionary Society activities in Bulaq between 1920 and 1950¹⁰ gives an idea of the model that inspired the program that survived into the mid-1970s when I arrived. As was true for most missionary activities, the goal was to win "souls for Christ" but in this case by using a more philanthropic approach. The infant welfare program was intended to "remould Egyptian mothering into the modern European maternity models that emphasized preventive and educational methods to reduce infant mortality."¹¹ The intention was to generate lasting social change and not just to provide charity.

The programs focused on teaching young mothers child-care techniques and hygiene. Some central interests were baby washing, teaching better nutrition and sleeping habits, preventing fly-borne diseases, and dealing with general health problems. Women were taught to make baby cots from palm fronds to keep the babies off the floor and to sew little frocks in the European style; babies were weighed and their mothers were sold or given mosquito netting, milk, and cod-liver oil. There was a great deal of resistance at first to the bathing program for what the missionaries called "superstitious reasons," but eventually mothers seemed to enjoy the weekly event. There were regular talks on disease prevention, child care, the life of Christ, and cruelty toward animals. The center's walls were "pleasantly covered" with pictures of local women and their babies and scenes of foreign countries. British "lady visitors" went from home to home to collect information on what training the women needed and to see whether the center's programs were actually changing practices in the households. They

claimed that during their visits, they taught the women to cook more nutritious meals and practice better sanitation. The once-a-week gospel services, which both Christians and Muslims attended, were the highlight of the program and, with the home visits, provided opportunities for the missionaries to spread their religious messages. Indeed, all the activities were imbued with a spiritual dimension that, by the 1970s, was explicitly compartmentalized into the Wednesday religious services that only Christians attended. Eventually the organizers added a kindergarten, Sunday school classes, and a girls' club. In the early decades, as in the 1970s, the staff complained about women coming mainly to take advantage of the material benefits provided by the center, which included mainly food stuffs and clothing.

Lunde believes local women became "strategically engaged" in the activities of the center, as evidenced by the extent of their attendance in specific activities and their demand for more services, such as curative treatments rather than just preventative ones, and their request that the center teach income-generating skills, such as embroidery, to the younger girls. She says that because of the ever-present shortage of funds for such programs, CMS would probably not have funded the activities if local women had not attended.¹²

This raises the interesting question of whether the staff, by the 1970s, ever fully understood the original intentions of the programs or ever asked if they were still beneficial and worth the resources the church poured into them. The prevailing sentiment seemed to be that church officials and staff knew what the poor needed and there was no need to investigate further. Reading Lunde's descriptions of the old Bulaq Center, one gets the sense that the foreigners modestly adjusted their programs to their clients' expressed needs as long as the changes fit their ideas of how to improve the lives of the poor. Their perceived "kindly" intentions, in the end, made the offerings more palatable after initial local resistance. Lunde's point is that the original welfare model was not confined to handing down indelibly shaped programs but that the foreigners were receptive to the observed and expressed needs of their clients.

After Egyptian independence from the British in 1952, there was a short interval when the future of the center was uncertain. But then the Suez Crisis (1956) precipitated the departure of foreign missionaries from Egypt and many of their properties were nationalized.¹³ To avoid the seizure of Anglican properties, the Egyptian Episcopal Church took them over and assumed administrative responsibilities for the programs in progress.

During the Nasser period, the center assumed a different character. New rules and restrictions regarding private clubs made it best to close down the sports club for young men, which the government saw as a political threat, and the center concentrated its programs instead on activities for women and children.¹⁴ The administrators, however, found it difficult to avoid politics

altogether. One of the large downstairs rooms in the center was sequestered by a local political leader from the only political party, the Arab Socialist Union, and until late in 1977, although the room was unused, the key was held by this man who had become the local political boss in the area. Also during the Nasser years, the priest in charge of the center was imprisoned for a few months “for antigovernment activity” but was released when no evidence could be produced against him. But his problems caused the church to put out a statement emphasizing the center’s essentially Egyptian interests. The suspiciousness bordering on paranoia of the Nasser period left a cloud of anxiety on staff psyches that still shaped their cautious approach into the 1970s.

For a while, the center fared better during Sadat’s tenure. Authorities were able to avoid government scrutiny by maintaining the center’s registration through the Egyptian Episcopalian Church rather than the more usual way for nongovernmental organizations through the Ministry of Social Affairs. In this way, it managed to escape financial review and detailed scrutiny of its activities and to retain a measure of independence from government control.

By the 1970s of course, the center was no longer run by foreigners and was essentially Egyptian run, though several board members from time to time were foreigners (English and German). The legacy of English administration, however, continued to leave traces on the psyches of staff, some of whom remembered the British period as a time when the center was most active and well run. The Egyptian administrators continued to maintain a low profile to avoid attracting government attention and continued their “political correctness” by focusing on women and children and opening their doors to Muslim participation in order to be more transparent. The CMS model of infant and maternal welfare continued to shape center activities even when they no longer fulfilled their original purposes.

Summary

This chapter traced the historical influences that shaped the physical character and conditions of Bulaq in the 1970s. It showed the origins of the Bulaq Center first as an Anglican-run and then as an Episcopal-run organization after the British left Egypt and how its programs over the years were impacted by political forces. Of note were the program models established by the British administrators that, even 20 years later, continued to inspire center activities under the Egyptian Episcopal Church, although without much understanding of the original intent or effort to move beyond the form to provide more effective services for the community.

CHAPTER 3

Christian Migration to Cairo

Why would Christians settle in neighborhoods where most of their neighbors were Muslim? Were there different residential choices available to Christians of various social classes and origins? What about the denominational issue? How did the denominations relate to one another and to what extent were their boundaries permeable? How did these issues affect the Bulaq community?

What Brought Christians to the Muslim Quarter of Bulaq?

Abu-Lughod writes that in preindustrial Cairo, religious affiliation and place of origin more than income sorted people into quarters of the city.¹ Bulaq was largely populated by Muslims, while Coptic Christians lived primarily in what were the port areas of Azbakiya (near Bulaq) and Qasr al Sham in Old Cairo. The fact that the two areas were ports was significant because of the close relationship at the time between ethnic identity and occupations. The Copts worked in jobs required in port areas: scribes, account keepers, and custom officials.²

As the main areas housing Christians became crowded, new areas opened up nearby, often by well-to-do Christians whose money gave them more choices. In 1907, Christians were still largely residing in areas near Azbakiya Gardens, but by 1927, their preferred residential area became the expanding northern quarters of the city.³ Shubra, in particular, to the north of Bulaq became a favored place of residence as Christians bypassed the heavily Muslim area of Bulaq.

The year 1927 marked the pinnacle of ethnic selection. Since then, neighborhoods in Cairo increasingly organized around class and income level rather than strictly ethnic or religious considerations. This trend intensified in the 1960s and early 1970s as housing shortages made it difficult to choose freely where people wanted to live. For poor Christian migrants, the availability and

cost of housing weighed heavily in their choices. Bulaq was known for having some of the most inexpensive substandard housing in the city, and yet for Christians, it had the advantage of being a stone's throw from the Christian neighborhoods of Shubra and Qulali.

Abu-Lughod says that residence patterns were also influenced by region of origin. This meant that rural migrants settled in Cairo at the ends of transport lines to their villages: Lower Egyptians near bus terminals connecting with the Delta in the northern part of Cairo and Upper Egyptians in southern areas of the city near train stations linking to Upper Egypt. This distinction, however, was not as clear for Bulaq residents, since transport to both northern and southern destinations could be found at the main train station only blocks away from Bulaq.

Data gathered in the late 1970s showed that two-thirds (120) of the Bulaq Center's Christian members migrated directly from the south (95 percent of all those who migrated). They therefore represented the direct opposite of Abu-Lughod's observation that migrants distributed themselves based on proximity to their place of origin. Her generalization, however, did hold true for Bulaq's Muslim residents who come mainly from the northern Delta.

One must assume therefore that lower-class Christians bucked the trend based on priorities other than place of origin. Census data in the 1970s showed that the proportion of Christian residents increased dramatically as one neared the well-established northern Christian neighborhood of Shubra. Ranking the districts by distance from Shubra, from farthest to nearest, the two Bulaq districts of Adawiya and Hawd al Zuhur contained only 8 and 15 percent Christians while the closest two Qulali districts contained 38 and 40 percent of Christians.⁴ This supports the conclusion that Christians persisted in their desire to live as near to other coreligionists as finances allowed. Since Bulaq Center members were the poorest of the poor, they undoubtedly felt compelled to live in these cheaper Muslim neighborhoods. Another anomaly that widened the gap with their Muslim neighbors was that these Christians came from conservative areas in the south of Egypt rather than, as their Muslim neighbors, from the more "liberal" Delta regions.

Examples of Migrant Choices

Bulaq Center administrators, staff, and clients exemplify the choices made by Christian migrants of different classes. Many of the early poorer migrants came during and after World War II, in the 1930s and 1940s, when military recruits found urban life attractive and city jobs less arduous and better paid than farm labor. Others came after independence, in the late 1950s and 1960s, when rural communities were disrupted by Nasser's land-reform programs. When asked

why they migrated, Bulaq residents invariably told me, “For bread”—the word “bread” in the Egyptian vernacular being the same word as “to live.” Most also claimed they hoped never to have to return permanently to their villages.

The chairperson of the board who oversaw Bulaq Center activities described “migrating” with her family from Upper Egypt. Her experience was colored by belonging to a landowning family that, as a matter of course, moved back and forth between the city and the countryside long before the family took up permanent residence in Cairo. In a discussion of why people came to Cairo, Mme Habib explained that Nasser increased pressures on the upper classes to migrate when he broke up their large land parcels and distributed them among peasant farmers.⁵ After that, they were no longer able to live solely off the income of their properties nor could they hire the same number of workers to keep up the land that was left. Some of these landowning Christians had acquired their wealth originally as tax collectors,⁶ so when their lands and income were gone, they moved permanently to cities where they already had connections. Many had large houses in Cairo where they lived part time, while their children attended school. The main pull factors were opportunities to engage in comfortable professional and business occupations, better educational opportunities for their children, and a more enjoyable cultural life.

The center’s social worker, Mme Ansaf, from a more modest background, was born in Assiut in 1920. When she was young, her father, who was a government worker, fell from a tram on a visit to Cairo and was killed. Her mother, who had been educated in the American Mission School in Assiut, was given a job as a teacher and allowed to enroll her three children in the school. Consequently, Ansaf studied in a school run by Presbyterian missionaries up to grade nine. One day a young man, Ibrahim, spotted her and asked her mother for her hand in marriage. They married and, after several postings, he was assigned to Cairo in 1969 to teach English in public secondary schools. By that time, their four children were older and Ansaf joined the Bulaq Center to augment their income.

Other Christians from the south who had worked for the landowners in intermediary positions—women as seamstresses and domestic workers and men as supervisors of farm workers—also found themselves out of jobs. In the late 1950s, when migration reached its peak, these Christians along with the workers they supervised were attracted to the factories Nasser was building and the enormous boom in the construction industry.⁷

With her intimate knowledge of the community, Mme Ansaf described how many of the Bulaq Center clients came to the city. Often men would come first to the city to find work and then, when ready to marry, would return to their villages to find wives. Even men born in the city would go back to Upper Egypt

to seek wives, since they believed village women made more obedient, docile, and virtuous wives.

On arrival in Cairo, Mme Habib, Mme Ansaf, and the clients of the center segregated themselves into socioeconomically appropriate areas known for residents of minority religious backgrounds: for affluent Mme Habib, Kubba Gardens (Jewish and Christian); for middle-class Mme Ansaf, Shubra (Christian); and finally for the poor center clients, the mixed Muslim-Christian neighborhood of Bulaq. The important point is that these Christians came from the south, shared the same conservative views, and within the limits of their income, choose areas where they could be as close to other Christians as possible. Mme Habib's family, with the wealth to make real choices, later moved to the sophisticated suburbs of Maadi, where the emphasis was on socioeconomic status rather than religious identity.

Ansaf noted that by the 1970s, times had changed and migration to Bulaq had slowed considerably. There were several reasons: One was the scarcity of housing that forced people to look elsewhere for places to live. If a dwelling became available in Bulaq, it was taken immediately by someone already living in the community or more rarely by outsiders helped by local relatives. The census of 1976 showed that the annual growth rate for the Cairo Governorate had declined substantially from 4.1 percent in 1960–66 to 1.8 percent in 1976. Another reason for the decline in this period was that rural Egyptians were increasingly looking for work in other Arab countries where the pay was better.

Another reason migration slowed was the increasing tendency for people to live outside Cairo where rents were lower and neighborhoods were not so crowded. The aspects of city life that once attracted people to the city were now available in smaller southern cities like Assiut: education up to and including university level,⁸ hospitals, government offices, and commercial establishments where jobs were available. Many felt the quality of life was better in these small cities.⁹ Most areas could be accessed by foot, and bus lines allowed people to commute from outlying areas to jobs in the center of town, whereas in Cairo, people spent hours commuting to work from the distant areas where they could afford to live. Bulaq, despite its disrepair, was a desirable area for the poor because it was located near the main Cairo railway station where "pick-up" jobs were easy to find and housing was not expensive. The consequence of declining migration was that by the 1970s, Bulaq's neighborhoods were stabilizing and were no longer being constantly disrupted by rural newcomers with their infusion of conservative values.

The Denominational Issue

Christians in Egypt at the time reported having little difficulty moving from one Christian denomination to another when it was personally or politically advantageous. Reasons for converting are suggested by one observer's comments about her own conservative Upper Egyptian family. Her father was born an Orthodox Copt but converted to the Protestant faith in the early twentieth century because he felt that the Coptic Church was a dying institution. Many priests, she said, were illiterate and unable even to read the Bible. By contrast, Protestantism had a dynamic appeal to the people. As she put it, "The missionaries provided schools and religious instruction in areas where rural people and the urban poor had no access to education. These badly needed services came at the right time, especially for girls since the single-sex environments of the Church schools provided a respectable place for them to gather." And she added, "The American-run schools taught Egyptians to serve their country and not just sit at home." In the ensuing decades, many women leaders came out of these missionary schools in Upper Egypt. The speaker remarked that when her family moved to Cairo after land reform, they rejoined the Coptic Church for the practical reason that its claims of indigenous origin made it more popular during a period of nationalist feelings. But when she married, she joined the Episcopal Church because of her husband.

Despite the ease of moving from one denomination to another, bitter stresses developed among the Christian sects of Egypt, and in the end, competition led to a revival of the Coptic Church itself.¹⁰ While lay Christians recognized that conversions to other Christian denominations occurred more as a matter of convenience than conscience—to marry or divorce, to attend a nearby church, or because a particular Church provided attractive services—church functionaries tended to be concerned with dwindling community numbers and were more purist in their feelings about the theological differences with other branches of Christianity.

The Bulaq Center—its administrators, staff, clients, and supporters—for the most part represented in microcosm the juxtaposition of Christian denominations in Egypt. This was true with respect to the relative proportions of Copts, Episcopalians, and Protestants engaged in center activities. Where it was not true was in the larger role the Episcopal Church played in organizing and supporting the activities of the center. Nationally Copts wielded political power and their popes dealt with the government on behalf of all Christians. This was largely a matter of their numbers, but it also related to the history of Christian denominations in Egypt.

In listening to Christians talk, it was obvious they made certain assumptions about the different denominations. Episcopalians, for example, were believed to be prosperous people whose proximity to the British rulers gave them social and

economic advantages up until independence. Protestant Evangelicals associated with American missionaries were considered civic-minded and hardworking. Copts felt themselves to be the “original Egyptians” and dismissed others as Muslim invaders or Christians who converted to Islam for base reasons. Copts were harder to categorize, since they encompassed the vast majority of the Christian population—rich and poor, urban and rural. But Evangelicals often considered them unenlightened, ritualistic, and superstitious, and many criticized Coptic functionaries for their ostentatious lifestyles and greed.

On the class scale, which was important in Egypt, Episcopalians were assumed to be upper class, the Evangelicals educated middle and upper-middle class, and Copts running the gamut of class characteristics. These assumed characteristics broke down quickly in real life as, for example, in the case of Episcopalian priests who by dint of their theological studies often rose from the lower to the middle classes and usually no higher. And similarly, some Evangelicals never achieved the educated level thought to be the trait of Protestants because of their associations with missionary schools. Also not infrequently, Copts were highly educated intellectuals and committed to serving the community. Most of the orphanages and homes for the poor elderly were Coptic institutions.

Why does this matter? Staffing patterns in the Bulaq Center, whether intentional or not, reflected these preconceptions. Not unexpectedly, officials of the Episcopal Church that provided the main support for the center were the ultimate supervisors of Bulaq Center personnel. “Policy formulation” was vested in the Episcopalian upper-class chair of the board, the elderly Mme Habib. Her ideas—in the form of orders—were implemented with deference by the middle-class administrators and lower-class workers in the center, even when the orders didn’t make sense to them. One Easter, for example, Mme Habib decided to improve the hygiene of the Bulaq families by giving them a bar of soap and a towel. Mme Ansaf knew these “gifts” would not be welcomed, since soap cost very little and the families had plenty of rags to act as towels. They preferred instead the usual Easter gifts of money, food commodities, or lengths of dress material. Nonetheless, Mme Ansaf handed out these items and loyally absorbed their complaints.

Mme Habib’s position was reinforced by her class position, which came from the fact that her family had been large property owners. The class factor was premised on the general belief in Egyptian society that people from higher socioeconomic classes have an inherent capacity to manage and that people of the lower classes should carry out their orders. This perception came partly from their power to hire and fire but the passivity with which the lower classes accepted this “fact of life” made me wonder if the lower classes actively were hiding contrary feelings¹¹ or had so absorbed the stance of subservience that it was simply an automatic reaction.¹² The comparative advantage of higher

classes spilled over into gender relations, so that upper-class women had no problem managing staff—male or female—as long as the staff was beneath them on the socioeconomic scale.

Being lower class and female had the opposite effect. A college student working on youth activities in Bulaq remarked that one time when other student volunteers asked a local girl who seemed a natural leader to conduct youth meetings, “none of the other youth would listen to her because she was from their same level.” He added, “They obey and respect us because we are of a higher social level but don’t respect someone equal to them.”

Class realities in staffing were overlaid with other expectations. Below the “policy-making” Mme Habib came a second tier of less prosperous and less well-educated Episcopalians: the priest, Reverend Aziz, and his wife. These two had responsibility for handling money—the center budgets and the receipts for the sale of handicrafts. Below them on the work scale were the Evangelical (Protestant) “workhorses,” like the social worker Ansaf and the midwife Sitti Nargus, whose educations were modest but who were known for their “selfless” commitment to serving the community. Mme Ansaf was school principal, chief cook for the hot-meals program, knitting teacher, organizer and speaker at the religious service, and purchaser of items needed for the center. She also visited each center member once a year or more if a family was having difficulty. Sitti Nargus held pre- and postnatal clinics and attended births. Both reported their expenditures to Reverend Aziz who paid them their modest monthly salaries.

The next layers in the hierarchy were Copts—three poorly paid teachers from the neighborhood who carried out the mechanical jobs of teaching classes, plus an illiterate janitor, and finally the mostly illiterate clients of the center. At the bottom of the ladder were two Muslim women who cleaned on clinic days.

In sum, the center’s staffing pattern, whether intended or not, represented an idealized hierarchy of Christian denominations as seen from an Episcopalian perspective. Episcopalians performed policy-making tasks and controlled the finances. Protestants carried out activities requiring initiative and hard work. Copts did low-level mechanical jobs and constituted the bulk of the poor beneficiaries. Muslims were hired as a goodwill gesture at the bottom of the ladder.

Summary

This chapter has described the Christians of Bulaq and the motivations that brought migrants from the south to take up residence in the mostly Muslim neighborhoods of Bulaq. Examples from the center’s personnel show residential choices that earlier were available to Christians of different social classes and how denominational and class differences affected staffing patterns and clientele in the Bulaq Center.

CHAPTER 4

Bulaq Center Members

This chapter examines the characteristics of Christian members of the Bulaq Center using information gathered during visits that Ansaf and I routinely made to local homes. Although Christian members of the center comprised only a small sample of Bulaq residents—ones that for the most part were self-selected for their vulnerabilities—they nonetheless show us a great deal about the poor, their living conditions, and some of the values they held in the 1970s.

Residents of Bulaq were universally considered lower class by outsiders. The term needs explanation because it is much more complicated than income level. Some in the quarter—such as skilled workers, shopkeepers, or hashish dealers—often earned incomes much higher than most members of the middle class. The term at the time implied modest levels of education, if any, a special way of dressing (*baladi*), and blue-collar occupations, style of housing, and less distinctly of speaking and conservative rural values—for example, about women working. The middle classes contrasted markedly in higher levels of education—secondary or university completion—white-collar occupations, and different styles of housing and dress. A shift from lower to middle class in Bulaq almost always occurred at marriage, often when two young people had achieved the requisite education levels that allowed them to shift their expectations. One of these shifts was in expecting the educated wife to work in an office.¹

The Clients of the Center

As women joined the slowly moving line, their cheerful noise became a pandemonium in the spacious hall, accompanying the acrid smell of damp babies. The women dressed in the ubiquitous *gallabiya bi sufra*, the overdress worn in public to cover their everyday dresses underneath. They all—Muslim and Christian alike—concealed their hair with a kerchief (*mandil*) tightly tied at

the nape of the neck and looped to tie at the top of the head. Some topped this with a graceful, transparent black veil that draped to their shoulders. From the back, the women were only distinguishable by height, shape, and gait. With many having come from conservative communities in the south, they shunned color and provocative behavior in public, and indeed the friendly banter in the room was a letting-go not usual in the street when they met—certainly not when compared to their northern Muslim neighbors who held their own in the loud repartee of the streets.

It was baby-weighing day at the Bulaq clinic, a time enjoyed by these women meeting friends and acquaintances from different parts of the quarter. News travelled up and down the line, interspersed with occasional bursts of laughter, such as when a mother held her child at arms' length to avoid the stream of urine soiling the front of her dress. As they reached the table, they thrust a creased file card at the nurse/midwife Sitti Nargus and unwrapped their babies before placing them on the unsteady scales and hearing the verdict. The babies startled at the cold machine; some cried inconsolably, while others sent beatific smiles at their mothers, and yet others slept through the whole procedure. The staff member in charge recorded the date and weight and returned the card to the mother who thrust it down the front of her dress and turned to receive her reward of powdered milk.

It never seemed quite clear to me what the clinic was about. Mothers of visibly undernourished babies were admonished to feed them more milk, presumably from the can they took away. But did the mothers have any idea why the babies needed to be weighed each week when it was usually apparent to them which babies were doing well? Were they trained to mix the milk powder properly or, given the contaminated nature of the water supply, was it even a good idea to encourage the use of this product? Was it a brand formulated for babies? Instructions on the can explained what to do in Arabic, but most of the women couldn't read and used taste to determine the consistency of the milk or, when running out at the end of the week, added more water to make it last longer. Most families used the milk for the entire family and only when necessary for the babies—probably a good for both babies and the older children who drank the milk.

In many ways, the baby clinic was emblematic of activities at the Bulaq Center, "a form without an apparent function." Where did these ideas come from? Why were the clinics so well attended? What did the staff think they were accomplishing, or did they even think about it? The clinics were most certainly a weak imitation of the welfare services set up by the British as described earlier. While the British surely understood the rationales for "well-baby" clinics, they seemed not to have explained them adequately to their Egyptian managers for, by the time they hastily retreated, the clinics had

become routine affairs carried out on orders of the local church without any understanding of the resources needed for the kind of follow-up that would have made the efforts productive.

Participants

Two kinds of participants came to center activities: “members”—my name for the Christians who received benefits—and “clients”—others who participated in activities generally. Mme Ansaf kept brief notes of names and home locations on both types of participants and additionally detailed attendance records on members. To qualify as a member, a person had to attend the once-a-week Christian religious service regularly. A person was dropped from membership if she missed a number of meetings without good cause. Ansaf’s list of members, whether particularly needy or not, were eligible for “gifts” at Christmas and Easter and a small monthly stipend that was later dropped for being too costly. This fact alone—that scarce resources were spent to motivate attendance—suggests the center’s priority in communicating religious instruction to local Christians.

Ordinarily only one woman “represented” a family at the services, since incentives were bestowed equally on the eligible households, so it was not necessary for more than one person to be present. This suggests the obvious—that while the center’s priority may have been religious edification—the members were more interested in material rewards. In one case, a deaf woman attended services regularly after she married, although she was unable to hear any of the sermon.

In reality, attendance at the services was not as much the prerequisite Ansaf would make it seem. She was just as likely to judge the women’s eligibility for gifts based on need as well as attendance. Over a 13-week period (December 29, 1976, through April 13, 1977), which began just before one holiday² and ended just after another, attendance reached its highest point the Wednesday before gifts were given out and dropped by half in the week following the gift giving. A midpoint Wednesday was attended by only two-thirds of those who would have been there at the peak. The records in fact showed only a rough correlation between the amount received in welfare payments and attendance at the services. Regularity of attendance was about the same in all age groups, with the exception of slightly lower attendance in women in their twenties who usually had small children.

The threat of tying welfare payments and gifts to attendance proved reasonably effective in bringing the most vulnerable Christians in to hear the messages embedded in the sermons. Although the monetary benefits were small, they were enough to avert financial crisis for some of the very poor, and



Figure 4.1 Madame Ansaf with center members



Figure 4.2 Christian women at the Wednesday religious services

more important, they strengthened their identification with the Christian community.

According to the informal center records I collected, there were 175 Christian families registered out of which anywhere from 40 to 120 women could be found at any one religious service. When money was still being distributed, a member in good standing might receive the equivalent of about 50 cents a month in addition to gifts at Christmas and Easter.³ Mme Ansaf usually gave the sermon—often a passage from the Bible and then an informal explanation of how the lesson applied to the women present. The details needed little explanation, since Bulaq in modern times seemed surprisingly little removed from Biblical days. Unrelated to these Wednesday services but with similar religious goals was the Bible School held on Fridays and attended by about 80 Christian children.

Another “reward” of membership⁴ was an annual visit from Ansaf. Although official members numbered 175, my records showed her total visits to be many more—roughly to 250 Christian households. The additional visits were mostly to those with special difficulties or to women commemorating special events such as those with newborns, those who suffered a death in the family, or those who had become engaged or married. She dropped everything when conflicts broke out among families or when there were health or financial crises. On Saturdays, she gave out chits to 50 (48 Christians and two Muslims) of the

poorest to receive free meals. These latter beneficiaries were chosen for need rather than participation in the religious meetings. The meat for the meal that Ansaf cooked was donated by a church in an affluent suburb with a large foreign membership.

The second group of “participants” outside the membership included all the Christians and Muslims who attended activities of any kind at the Bulaq Center. While Muslims were discouraged from attending Christian religious services, they were welcome to participate in other center activities. About half of those who attended the child welfare clinics, child-care lessons, and health checks by the midwife were Muslims. The youth-group meetings run by volunteers had been mixed Muslims and Christians until 1977 but became exclusively Christian to avoid the appearance of proselytizing. Christians also worried that their children’s friendships with Muslims might attract them to Islam.

The literacy, embroidery, and sewing classes were attended by more Muslims (about 80 percent) than Christians. This fact reinforced Mme Habib’s frequent observation that the Bulaq Christians were lazy whereas Muslims took advantage of opportunities to better themselves and their children.⁵

Characteristics of the Members

Of the Christian members with complete records, roughly half were married and living with their husbands, while 42 percent were widowed. Only a handful was single, separated, or divorced. Young single women rarely attended meetings in any case and then only with an older relative. It was thought improper for young unmarried women to attend public meetings where others would think they were being “paraded about as prospective brides.”

Most of the women did not know their precise ages, although most gave an approximate age they thought they were at marriage and also the age difference between themselves and their husbands—two facts that seemed of considerable importance to show they were desirable brides (not too old) and had choices (men who were older but not too old). We estimated that about a third of the members were in their twenties or thirties, a quarter in their forties, and about 40 percent 50 or older. The majority (59 percent) was between the ages of 20 and 50, a time when families were at their largest and family resources strained the most—sometimes making it hard for income earners to provide even basic necessities. This may explain the interest in obtaining the meager benefits attendance at religious meetings provided. The remaining women were past childbearing age, and indeed older women with fewer responsibilities could conveniently “represent” families and obtain any benefits. By 50 many women were widowed because, as figures showed for still-living husbands,⁶ the average age difference between them and their wives was 11 years, and men’s longevity

overall averaged two years less than women's.⁷ Sometimes young women from poor households, desperate for the pittance they might receive, attended with their babies and small children, but the commotion they caused was frowned on by the older women.

These statistics combined with observation suggested that acute poverty was cyclical in Bulaq. Parents of a potential bride usually insisted in their marriage contract that the couple have sufficient resources when they married—that the man had a regular income and that the couple move into an already furnished dwelling of some kind. When babies arrived, this sufficiency might continue for a time, but once there were more and older children, family budgets strained to meet the basic needs of food, clothing, and school fees. As the children grew older, the families had to amass marriage expenses. Even after children left home, their parents' incomes, which often did not keep up with inflation, might still not prove sufficient. Once male income earners died, widows rarely had more than what their children gave them each month. Few received pensions or any other regular income.

Education⁸

Education at the time was the only avenue out of the lower classes and, more than income level or any other characteristic, was a signifier of middle-class status. There were 617 at-home children among the 177⁹ member households. Only 66 percent of the 328 school-age (6–15) children were attending school, despite the compulsory education rule that they must attend to grade nine. Another 21 percent had never been to school, and 13 percent had left before grade nine. Of males, 18 percent never went to school, and for females, 31 percent never went to school. This gender gap came from Christian parents being more protective of girls or needing their help with younger siblings at home. The general attitude among these families was that girls learned more that was useful to them from their mothers.

By the mid-1970s, parents were increasingly sending both boys and girls to the first few years of schooling and then withdrawing them as incidental expenditures for, among other costs, private tutoring increased or major exams approached at the end of the primary level that required added expense and commitment. Clearly, however, economic factors alone were not a determining factor. "Self-sufficient" families were the highest in participation (76 percent), followed by the "poor" (61 percent), and trailed by the "affluent" (42 percent) members. The reason for low rates among the affluent was that many of these families owned shops or could provide other income-earning opportunities for their children that were deemed better than options offered by graduation from public education. Most parents saw education as having two useful levels:

the primary years where children were taught literacy and numeracy skills and completion of the university level that led to a government job and entry into the middle class. Middle school added almost no extra value to these opportunities other than as a bridge into higher levels of education. As a result, boys of around 12 to 15 often sought the more attractive option of apprenticeships in local workshops, where they could become mechanics, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and small-appliance repairmen. At the same age, girls might leave school for reasons of “protection” and “apprenticing” with their mothers to enhance their marriage potential. Interestingly however, among the center’s members, the ratio of boys’ to girls’ participation favored girls at the preparatory (middle-school) level, as boys dropped out into the labor market and girls who were academically successful continued. Parents increasingly accepted the idea of girls working as long as their jobs were in respectable government offices. The potential to earn an income was coming to be seen as enhancing their marriage potential with educated boys.

Housing

The members of the Bulaq Center, with few exceptions, occupied some of the poorest housing in the quarter. Their accommodations varied from a spacious apartment of several rooms at one end of the scale to, at the other end, a space under the stairs of a multifamily house, a converted chicken coop in a courtyard, or the inside of a bread-baking oven opened up to provide a sleeping space. Muslim homes comprised a similar range but were skewed to the affluent end of the Bulaq scale.

Eighty percent of the Christian members lived in a single room that accommodated all the functions of their households. Sixteen percent enjoyed the comparative luxury of two rooms, and a handful had three or four rooms. Two women had no permanent residence at all, shuttling between relatives’ homes.

The average monthly rent of these homes was LE 2.24 (at the time, LE 1 was worth about \$1.40). This sum included the costs of water and electricity if available, which they were in 41 percent of the homes. A quarter of the homes had neither. Overall, 63 percent had water taps in their buildings but not necessarily in their homes, and roughly half had electricity.¹⁰ None of the homes had heating or cooling and few had any refrigeration. Waste water was thrown in the street.

The rooms in single- and multiple-family dwellings were small to moderate in size, normally not more than 15 by 15 feet and usually smaller. The occupants acquired furnishings in a predictable order based on the functions performed in the room. First, they bought a large double bed, which was the main requirement when a couple planned to marry. The second was either a

cushioned bench for sitting or a cupboard to hold belongings. If there were three items of furniture in a room, they were these three. The next addition was a table on which to put the necessities for cooking: a small kerosene cooker, some pots and pans, and a few dishes. These items together comprised the basic inventory of a lower-class home, accommodating the major functions of sleeping, storing, entertaining, and cooking. Rooms in these homes were almost always multifunctional, even when a family occupied more than one room—bedding was stored away during the day to allow for other activities. Bathrooms and water taps, if available, were normally located in the public areas of buildings for the use of several families. Some women sold canisters of water to neighbors who weren't lucky enough to have taps. Other families without taps stood in lines at public faucets that were usually located in public squares among heaps of garbage. A self-appointed male "helper" had to be given a piaster for each canister filled.

This kind of lower-class housing arrangement—where rooms invariably were multifunctional—helps us understand what happened when members of Bulaq families became "middle class." This shift in status normally came with graduation from university or, in some cases, high school if a diploma led to a job with enough income to afford a change to a middle-class lifestyle. The actual move came at marriage when the couple left their parents' lower-class housing and rented a flat in a lower-middle- or middle-class neighborhood. Instead of multifunctional rooms, the middle-class flat typically had several single-function rooms—a separate sitting room, bedroom, kitchen, and indoor bathroom—and was equipped with electricity. Often surprisingly, this change in class was not so much a matter of higher income—most were in poor paying government jobs—as it was a step up in education level from the previous generation. These middle-class couples often had lower incomes than the "richer" residents¹¹ of Bulaq working in shops or in skilled and semiskilled labor. The couples also adopted clothing that made their status obvious—"Western dress" or increasingly *zeyy Islami* (Islamic dress) for Muslim women or pantsuits and scarves for Christians. The point was to wear a dress that was conservative enough for Bulaq standards yet different enough from traditional dress to make the new status clear. Overall, the change in status involved a considerably higher level of consumption and that was one reason it was much easier if both members of the couple had completed education levels that made them eligible for government jobs.¹²

A benefit for women who reached these higher education levels was that they were treated with respect by those who knew them in Bulaq. "They are taught to see things more rationally, and to control their behavior. They are more polite and well mannered," one resident noted, adding, "They can walk in the street alone and people respect them." It of course helped when they were modestly

dressed, carried books, or otherwise indicated that they were on their way to class.

Christian Households

The word “household” in Bulaq, as I used it, encompassed the people who, for whatever reason, chose to share living accommodations. It was a residential unit that would probably have moved together to a new location if forced to do so. Usually when asked “Who lives with you?” people responded in terms of those who ate together daily and shared cooking facilities. An implication was that the group’s income producers would contribute to the expense of food. However, there were sometimes unusual exceptions, such as the elderly widow with little income who lived separately but was invited each day to eat with her neighbors, as they said, “out of sympathy for her difficult situation.” In return, she ran odd errands for them. Often in Bulaq when this kind of generosity was offered, people would say they did so because they knew how close they were themselves to similar catastrophes and hoped people would be similarly generous to them. Many (especially Muslims) said it was a religious duty to help people in need.

The average household size of Bulaq’s Christian members was 4.4 members but ranged in individual households from one to 11 members. The most common arrangement—roughly half (85 cases)—was the nuclear one of husband, wife, and unmarried children, with occasionally additional relatives or “part families” (15 cases) to increase the numbers in this category. The second most frequent grouping was partial families (26 percent, or 45 cases), where some key family member was absent. The absent person was usually the male provider, which meant these families had trouble remaining viable. The Bulaq families’ conservative views about women working in public (except in respectable office jobs) meant that unless there were other males ready to take on the provider role, the remaining members would have difficulty making ends meet. In a little more than a fifth (eight cases) of “part families,” the remaining members shared resources with relatives.

In 11 percent (19) of the households, women lived alone—an apparent contradiction to the norm that women should not live alone and “unprotected.” None of these women was younger than 50 years old, and their situation was usually determined by the absence or unwillingness of relatives to help. Certainly the expressed norm was for relatives to support elderly family members, but sometimes poverty or lack of living space prevented this.

Finally, a pattern that was rarely reported (two cases) was of extended families where adult sons raised their families in the home of their parents. This kind of extended family at the time was assumed to be the common pattern

in much of the literature on the Middle East. One explanation for its rarity in Bulaq was the scarcity of dwelling space and the already high person-per-room density of 3.7.

Family Income

Bulaq Center members tended, as already noted, to be poorer than many others in the area. This was to be expected given the welfare nature of the center's activities. Some comparatively affluent Christians even made a point of not attending meetings simply to show they were not in need of help; others attended for social reasons but didn't take the benefits. People were aware that a kind of reciprocity was required for participation. Members should remain loyal to the behavioral standards of the community and avoid what the head of the board called "the temptation for poor Christians to convert to Islam." By providing a bare minimum of support, the center sought to avoid acute crises while retaining control over members' behavior. The homilies of the services reinforced ideas about helping others and remaining committed to Christianity.

It was almost impossible for several reasons to determine the precise amounts of income available to members' families. First, there was an intense reticence about revealing exact income, whether high or low. People felt this information made them appear either pitiable on the one hand or enviable (and therefore bad luck) on the other. A second reason was that income earners, both male and female, rarely worked in jobs with regular incomes. They found "pick-up" work as porters in the railway station, piecework in factories producing clothing, water carriers, bread bakers, fruit and vegetable venders, barbers, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, sellers of secondhand furniture, ironers, shop assistants, and venders of prepared foods, gum, candies, and newspapers. A feature of this work was that it mostly depended on local customers, and therefore, prices were scaled to what people could afford and varied from day to day. Higher-paying jobs on the peripheries of Bulaq attracting outside customers for auto repair or clerks in a nearby bazaar selling clothing and household goods brought in more steady income, but the amounts varied. These attractive jobs needed connections to obtain the work. Finally, multiple members of a family might work, or a single provider might work at multiple jobs and, for various reasons, did not want to report the income. This was especially true when women earned income, since it undercut a man's reputation for women in his household to work. Nevertheless, from their reports and Ansaf's knowledge of the families, households averaged 2.2 sources of income, from either a single worker working more than one job or several workers working one job each. It was noteworthy that even with multiple jobs, a man was often unable to make an adequate living.

Looking back from the 2000s, it seems hard to believe how little a family needed to live on in the 1970s. The minimum wage paid to government workers at the time for full-time work was LE 12 a month. Although the government scale was not mandatory for the private sector, it acted as a guide. Many Bulaq families took in far less largely because most wage earners were unskilled, uneducated, underaged, part time, or self-employed.

We tried to estimate the amounts of family income that could normally be counted on each month, even though the total might not constitute all a family's resources. Uncounted was the considerable support coming from exchanges of goods and services, such as a family providing meals to a poor neighbor and she reciprocating with errands.

Ansaf at the time felt a family of four could live adequately on LE 12 a month and directed any small help she could provide to families that fell below that line. From her years of experience in Bulaq, Ansaf felt confident she could estimate how much a family took in, usually by the number of wage earners and the kinds of work they did. She had no hesitation correcting a person's claims when she felt they were off the mark—too high or too low—and I had no other way to verify the sums.

From the number of wage earners and the kinds of jobs they did, Ansaf estimated that 37 percent (64 families) brought in LE 10 or less a month, while 56 percent (98) relied on LE 15 or less, 70 percent (123) earned LE 20 or less, and the remainder (30 percent, or 52 cases) earned more than LE 20. According to her estimates, roughly half lived below the line she considered necessary for a family to survive. These statistics, however, didn't give a complete picture, since they didn't describe how the money was spent. The women complained that much of it went to men's pleasures: cigarettes, coffee shops, water pipes, and hashish and opium.

Given that these Christian families had at least one member attending a welfare center, it was not surprising to find that more than half (51 percent, or 90) said they received help from charitable organizations.¹³ The main income earners in the families reportedly were father-husbands (49 percent), male children living at home (35 percent), a wife-mother (21 percent), female children living at home (14 percent), and contributions of neighbors (13 percent). Those reporting income listed only monetary amounts and not the value of informal exchanges of goods and services among neighbors that were often significant sources of support.

Few families claimed sources of income from people living outside the immediate household, but for those who did, the contributions in order of prevalence came from male children living away from home, from pensions and government welfare (15 cases each), from relatives of the female head of household, from relatives of the male head of household, and finally from

female children living outside the home.¹⁴ A strong norm, violated in some of these cases, was the prohibition against asking daughters or their husbands or maternal relatives for money. When this happened, it was often given quietly. The burden of support even among these impoverished families was thought to properly rest with men.

Given the strong feeling about men providing support, it was surprising that some households (21) claimed that at least part of family income derived from women. Their income-earning activities included raising chickens for sale and making products that were sold in local shops or through the center, such as embroideries and other handwork. Forty women said they worked outside the home in factories, as servants or cleaning women, carrying water to neighbors, selling prepared food on the street, or walking small children to school for a tip. Financial strains tended to peak, as noted, when women were middle aged or older and more so when a male wage earner died. Women in this age range were usually illiterate and rarely possessed marketable skills, so the opportunities to work in “respectable” jobs were limited.¹⁵ Many in this age group also felt strongly that their extended family’s reputations would suffer if they worked outside their homes, even in dire circumstances and even when neighbors proved sympathetic to their situations. Ansaf encouraged women to work, giving herself as example, and found them jobs if they agreed, but few did and usually only the desperate ones.

The Role of Charitable Donations

Welfare of various forms, no matter how small or underreported, was felt by the members to be an important source of income in Bulaq. Government welfare, for those lucky enough to receive it, totaled around LE 3 or 4 a month but often ran out if the beneficiaries were not at the head of the line to receive it. Private charities varied from 25 piasters to several pounds a month. The Bulaq Center in the late 1970s, as noted, had a graduated scale from LE 1 for the neediest to 50 piasters for an average recipient and 25 piasters for those who were considered not to need it but who had attended religious services regularly. This last category included elderly women, to “give them dignity” when, for example, they lived with a married daughter. Or it might be given to encourage a woman “who worked hard to help herself.” The more usual 50 piaster amount covered the monthly rent for some of the smaller one-room dwellings. Ansaf kept mental note of those who were neediest and slipped extra items to them quietly to preserve their dignity.

Many women who attended the center’s religious services attended services at other area churches, thereby becoming eligible for their handouts and monthly payments. A woman might go to the Coptic services early Wednesday morning,

the center services later that morning, to another church service on Friday, and one on Sunday, thus becoming registered on the rolls of four organizations at the same time. Altogether, they might receive a pound or more a month and special gifts at holidays, while at the same time enjoying social activities in a context that was exclusively Christian.

When I asked Ansaf facetiously if attending religious services wasn't a little like having a regular job, she laughed and answered,

"Yes they attend and collect their pay."

"And if they don't come regularly?"

"We of course don't give them gifts. The gifts reward them for being good Christians, and visiting the sick or helping them in other ways. That's also what the rewards are for."

Summary

This chapter has examined the kinds of people who participated in center activities, showing that they fell into two categories: "members," all of whom were Christian and attended religious services on Wednesdays, and others—both Christian and Muslims—who participated more generally in other Bulaq activities but did not benefit in the same ways as the core Christian members. I call this later group "clients." The main distinction separating the groups was the gifts members received as a reward for attendance at religious services.

The data on members, although skewed to a poorer element of residents, nevertheless sheds light on the conditions under which poor families live. An important observation is that severe poverty is not a constant but rather occurs more often at certain points in the life cycle of families when there are a number of school-age children, when families are amassing funds to marry their children, or when male income earners predecease those dependent on them. Most newlyweds and couples starting families have sufficient income because of conditions set in their marriage contracts.

Another important point is that these families—even the poor ones—demonstrate considerable creativity in finding ways to augment their incomes. Most of the women accept social norms against their working in public but feel no qualms in accessing charitable resources. Most attempt, in other words, to solve their own problems and, in this respect, religion becomes a useful tool to exploit.

CHAPTER 5

Christian Religious Community

Does belonging to a religious community make sense for a dispersed group of Christians in a quarter of mainly Muslims? Do links through a Christian institution constitute a community? If it is rightfully a community, what were its purposes? Who were its leaders? How were its messages communicated?

Many forms of identity exist in societies, but it seems fair to say that Christians in Bulaq defined themselves as Christians first before identifying as residents of certain neighborhoods, or regions of origin, or more generally as Egyptians. This was not necessarily true of residents of other lower-class Cairo neighborhoods. For example, Adel Taher (1986), in a study looking for class identities in Kafr Seif, found that residents identified themselves as original inhabitants or newcomers. This prevented them from pursuing common interests with the government.

“Community”

Normally the word “community” implies a group of people occupying a common location and sharing a leadership structure. In this sense, Bulaq Christians were not a community. Their members were physically dispersed among a population consisting mainly of Muslims and there was no local leader who governed them in any formal sense. Moreover to the uninformed, there was little that distinguished Christians from the rest of the residents. At times, their common problems as members of the lower classes even seemed to overcome their sense of religious difference. This chapter looks at the links Bulaq Christians developed to form a loose community. Later chapters look specifically at relationships between Christians and Muslims, the characteristics that differentiated them, and the ways they maintained their separateness.

It is more correct to say that Christians in Bulaq existed as a community because they shared beliefs and concerns that differed from the rest of the

population. These included different religious beliefs, norms, and legal strictures, and the feeling that these differences sometimes caused them to be discriminated against in larger Egyptian society. Many felt a deep and abiding fear that Christians would be absorbed into Islam if they did not guard against this eventuality, and some even believed there might be a conspiracy afoot to make that happen. This fear led them to seek protection in numbers and to exert social controls on other Christians to prevent conversions. They were, in effect, what Antoun called a community of social control with a membership effectively defined by sanctions against departure from critical community norms.¹ The social control in this case was a process by which people subordinated their individual interests for the betterment of the group or, to give another emphasis, the process by which institutions, their representatives, and members encouraged internalization and conformity to their own cultural norms.² For the most part, Christians in Bulaq identified strongly with group norms and were willing to subordinate their own interests to community goals.

The question of why Christians, some of whom were only casually observant, would choose to become members of a Christian religious community is not totally explained by this observation. Nor does it fully explain why Christians remained members, even when for all practical purposes, there were often material advantages in converting to Islam. At the very least, it might have been better to remain invisible by not explicitly revealing their religious identity.

Christians, of course, quickly enumerate reasons for remaining Christian, not the least of which was a strong social pressure to remain within the community. There was also the expectation in Egypt that people normally accepted the religious affiliation they were born with. And in fact, there was little choice in the matter. Nonbelief was not accepted—being equated with having no morality—and Egyptians had to have a religious identity to determine whether Christian or Muslim sets of personal-status laws applied to them. Even just criticizing religious beliefs could lead “to divorce and loss of employment, and . . . imprisonment and assassination.”³

Other factors encouraged a sense of community in Bulaq Christians: the social links they developed in local religious institutions, their common origins in Upper Egypt that already made them a subculture in the quarter, their shared anxiety about Muslim intentions, and even the identifying markers that, when manifested, made them recognizably Christians. The factors that weakened the bonds of Christian community were their residential dispersion across mainly Muslim neighborhoods, their vulnerability to economic inducements, and the inadequacy of Christian institutions to address many of their important needs.

Physical Dispersion of Christians in Bulaq

Dispersion among Muslim residents was an important impediment to developing a sense of Christian community. We saw how poorer Christians settled in the less expensive neighborhoods of Bulaq to be near concentrations of Christians in Shubra. Even though migrants preferred to settle in areas with people from the same ethnic or regional origins, poor Christians did the next best thing and found housing in nearby areas they could afford. They were not totally cut off from Christians of other classes who, by means of their churches, channeled time and resources through the Bulaq Center and into their community.

Minorities in other parts of the world are known to withdraw into ghettos when they fear discrimination by the majority. But often this withdrawal was to a homogeneous quarter where boundaries could be erected to control interaction with the outside group. The situation was different in Bulaq, where Christians lived randomly among Muslims and every day interacted with them as neighbors and tradesmen. Although Bulaq Christians might have preferred a ghetto of coreligionists, this option was not available in the 1950s and 1960s when they arrived. At the time, only about 6 percent of the residents of Bulaq were Christians.⁴ This proved a formidable constraint in building a sense of Christian community.

Centers of Community

A community is more easily organized when a physical space exists where its members can meet. In Bulaq, two kinds of institutions were the visible face of Christian community: formal churches⁵ and church-organized welfare centers. The churches were independently organized, although linked to headquarters outside Bulaq. Centers, on the other hand, were charitable arms of churches that provided the funding and supervision for their activities.

Formal churches played a relatively limited role in Bulaq, mostly by providing places where Christians could satisfy their ritual needs—at weekly and holiday church services and to celebrate the rites of birth, marriage, and death. Outside of these formal affairs, little effort went into bringing in new members or gathering current members together socially. The churches exuded an aura of lethargy and decay—with pro forma services and personnel who kept their distance from lower-class parishioners. Except during services, the church doors remained locked and their large interior spaces unused.

By comparison, the Bulaq Center was a hive of activity with organized activities going on most mornings of the week and only closed on Sundays. Moreover, the center welcomed Muslims to participate in most of its activities. Only Wednesday services were exclusively reserved for Christians. Although one

might challenge the effectiveness of the center's activities, there was little doubt that they drew in substantial numbers of local residents where they became a receptive audience for the messages the center wanted to communicate.

In the Directory of Social Agencies in Cairo (published in 1956),⁶ and only claiming to be a partial list of social agencies in the city, there were 32 agencies listed for larger Bulaq and 39 for Azbakiya of which Qulali was a part. Of those where religious affiliation was obvious, Bulaq had seven Muslim and four Christian organizations. For the most part, the organizations claimed in the Directory to have formed for the purpose of improving conditions for the poor, giving religious instruction, promoting income-earning skills, organizing sports activities, or providing social and burial support for migrants of specific villages.

This official list, however, was just the tip of the iceberg as far as organizations that catered to the needs of the residents in Bulaq were concerned. It didn't include, for example, government health clinics or social welfare centers like the Bulaq Center that was registered under the Episcopal Church. Focusing as we do on the center gives only a partial idea of the organizational activity going on in Bulaq, but since many of its activities overlapped with those of other institutions, it is not completely unrepresentative.

Seeking the Goals of Community

As arguably the most visible Christian presence in Bulaq and the location where Christians gathered most days of the week, the center should have given us clues to the purposes of religious community. But other than statements about the general charitable nature of its mission, little appears in documents to explain why the Episcopal Church poured its limited resources into a center whose activities appeared to have so little practical impact on the lives of local Christians.

Nor was much to be found in board meetings, which at the time, were scheduled haphazardly and irregularly to approve expenditures and hear reports of center activities. Interesting events might occur at the center but were rarely reported nor, with the exception of the foreign members (German women who supported the preschool), was there much interest in analyzing activities to see if they were meeting the needs of the clientele. The board essentially followed a "form rather than function" imitation of earlier British welfare activities. This is not to downplay the genuine commitment of board members. They sincerely believed this was "the way centers like this should be run." As one board member explained, "Our Egyptian tradition is for the rich to help the poor."

When I asked in a board meeting about the goals of the center, the reply was to enumerate its activities, focusing on instrumental rather than visionary goals. But it was obvious that the formal programs were not set up to achieve their

stated purposes. Most girls in the literacy classes couldn't pass simple reading and writing exams at the end of the course. Those who learned knitting and sewing rarely found work in local garment factories. The women who produced handicrafts earned so little it was hardly worth their time. One board member remarked that "if they earned more it would spoil them and anyway they would spend any extra wastefully on nonessentials." Babies were weighed in the "well-baby" clinic and thrived or didn't thrive but not as a result of the clinic. The doctor in the weekly clinic invariably prescribed tonics and vitamins that people couldn't afford and eventually stopped coming when he no longer had time to donate his services. The small stipends distributed by the center never made much of a difference, and the once-a-week meal didn't solve the problems of the chronically malnourished. The family-planning clinic might have been useful had there been more of an effort to teach residents how to use birth-control materials. The midwife gave lessons on sanitation and health that were mostly out of date and ignored. One lesson, for example, focused on the importance of nursing babies on a regular schedule—every three or four hours—and not on demand. Her audience squatted on the floor while their babies nursed contentedly throughout the lecture.

Possibly aware of how little the activities attracted participants by themselves, the board set up incentives to encourage attendance at the most beneficial ones: the powdered milk for the baby clinics, the hot meals for preschoolers, permission to keep clothing produced in sewing classes, and so on. By far the preferred reward, because it was cash, was the stipend for attendance at the weekly religious services. The board looked with pride on these handouts, which coincided closely with their ideas of Christian charity.

There were of course "immaterial rewards" for participating, although not recognized by the board. Members found the center a place to socialize, to develop friendships, to exchange information, and to pursue other personal interests. Whispered appeals to Mme Ansaf would guarantee an urgent visit on the next day she made her rounds. The administrators conceived of these visits as similar to "parish visits" that kept in touch with members and encouraged them to stay involved. But Mme Ansaf made the visits the centerpiece of her activities, using the small amounts (five piaster, or ten cents, daily) given her to defray costs and her own meager salary to resolve minor problems in the community. As a result of her sympathetic personality and unbounded energy, the home visits became arguably the most effective center activity, even though ignored by the board.

In seeking a larger vision, I also considered those who funded the center to see if they tied their support to explicit goals. But again, there was nothing of a visionary nature to be found. Activities, services, salaries, and other operating costs for the Bulaq Center were covered through donations by international

Christian groups, resident foreigners, church members, and through handicraft sales. After operating costs were covered, much of the remaining was banked, I was told, and sat gaining interest. None of these disparate donors, it appeared, articulated any goal other than the charitable one of helping the poor.

One could easily find excuses for the center's lack of vision. First, the problems in Bulaq were too deeply rooted for a single welfare center to make much difference. Second, low-cost effective programs were simply beyond the visionary powers of the untrained, largely volunteer administrators. Third, the "high-level" policy makers in the Episcopal Church had only superficial contact with the Bulaq families, and many felt their low standard of living came anyway from deficiencies in their way of thinking. "Our Christians are lazy," Mme Habib used to say. "We give them opportunities and they don't make use of them." As educated Christians, they felt they knew what the poor needed: modest help to get by and encouragement to better themselves. The closest the board members came to policy decisions was when they discussed how to make people more aware of cleanliness and hygiene or of how to make them work harder to improve their station in life. But outside of a few homilies in the religious services, little of a practical nature was ever implemented to achieve these goals.

"Policies" Implied by Center Activities

Since the center's activities seemed so ineffective, I started looking elsewhere for the goals of the religious community. Ultimately, I believed they could be inferred from informal discussions in board meetings, conversations with Mme Ansaf, and discussions with other Christians from various classes.⁷ From these sources, the goals of the center and, by extrapolation, the Christian community seemed to be threefold: first, to support vulnerable Christians enough to avoid major disruptions within the Christian community; second, to encourage harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims in the quarter; and third, to prevent further defections of Christians to Islam. What the center provided was a location, a recognized affiliation, and modest resources to achieve these goals and, most effectively, Mme Ansaf who energetically carried out the policies.

What was the evidence for these "hidden" intentions? First, the center, through its active presence, symbolized for all residents of Bulaq that there was a substantial although benign Christian presence. For Christians overall, the size of the community was a sensitive issue. During the Sadat period, the Coptic Church had accused the government of undercounting their numbers in the census. A principal argument the Coptic Church used against birth control⁸ was that it would lead to "racial suicide in a numerically increasing Islamic society."⁹ Although the center provided birth control for a time, it was not actively promoted and, in actual numbers, more Muslims than Christians sought its

services. The concern about maintaining the size of the community led naturally to a concern for ensuring that Christians from all classes did not leave the community.

Second, the showpiece program of the center was the religious meeting and not its other welfare activities. By filtering out Muslims and giving the best of the center's limited resources to Christians, this showed the priority given to this activity. The central aim of the sermons was to encourage behaviors leading to a harmonious family and community life. Speakers persistently reiterated the sanctions that would be activated if a person ignored these warnings.

Finally, in allowing Muslims to join the classes, the center demonstrated its public commitment to maintaining a harmonious relationship. Whatever their private opinions, Christian members simply had to get along with Muslims or there might be dire consequences for all Christians. This was a message that Ansaf continually stressed through her words and her example. This was also in the interest of those more affluent Christian members who donated to the support of the center and who had more to lose if relations deteriorated.

Conveying Christian Moral Messages

Although not expressed explicitly as the center's vision, these implicit goals were constantly reiterated in center activities and through community sanctions. The less sensitive messages about being good family and community members were expressed openly in religious services, but prohibitions against conversion or admonitions about getting along with Muslims had to be handled more subtly in the way Muslims were treated in class and in Mme Ansaf's modeling of good relations with them.

Some examples of how expectations about family roles were communicated are the following:

One day Nargus, the midwife, was talking about cleanliness. She urged the women not to throw garbage in the street and to keep their babies and homes clean. "Don't let flies light on the babies' faces. You know what kind of mother a woman is by looking at her home and children. It doesn't matter how simple the house; poverty is not an excuse. Even the simplest home can be clean." Then to show the rewards of cleanliness and good-upbringing, she told the story of a rich man who came driving along the street one day. He stopped his car and rolled down the window: "Sitti Nargus, don't you remember me? You are like a mother to me." He was one of the babies she had delivered in the past. The implication was that if a mother does the right things for her children, they will grow up to be rich like this man. "God will help mothers who take good care of their children," and then she reiterated the main point: "The mother is responsible for what happens to her children."

The connection between cleanliness and wealth in the story was not lost on the audience who saw it as a story about the material consequences of good behavior.

The religious sermons provided an even more authoritative venue for communicating values. Mme Habib, or more often Mme Ansaf, led the service:

One day, Mme Habib was telling the biblical story of Mary Magdalen waiting at the door of the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed after the Crucifixion. She told the story dramatically about how one by one all Jesus's disciples and followers left except for Mary. She explained, "It is a woman who remains even when others forsake him." She went on to say that in Bulaq, women are the ones who must be patient, persevering, and faithful. "We may feel tired at times and think we are overburdened, but we must not give up. Christianity is a religion of work not just words. We have to look to Christ for our example. Work is a duty and any job is good if it is done in the spirit of serving others. Washing clothes, for example, can become a Christian labor of love if done in the spirit of humbly serving others."

She continued with more brief examples of how women should serve their families. Although there was a certain disconnect listening to Mme Habib who had servants to wash her clothes and prepare her meals, nevertheless the "sweetness" with which she gave the sermon, and her obvious sincerity, had a great appeal to the women. Many commented on how good the sermon had been.

On another day, in a rare appearance by an outsider, a recently graduated priest of the Episcopal Church came to preach. His sermon was on how God rewards the good and punishes the bad:

One of his stories was of two women, one of whom was fortunate enough to have five children while the other had only one. The first woman, however, was lazy and didn't take care of her five children, while the other woman was a good mother and was assiduous in her care of her one child. One day, the first woman was being careless as usual and didn't notice when all the children fell into the cooking fire and were burnt to death. The good mother, on the other hand, by being careful with what she had, in the end was richer with her one child than the careless woman who ended with no children.

Mme Ansaf noted after the service that the priest had only been preaching two months, but "his words were good."

These sermons were standard, but the details and the issues had a more immediate feeling in Bulaq where people actually did burn to death when their kerosene stoves exploded. What made the messages more effective was the way Mme Ansaf used her visits in the community to reinforce the homilies. She

was constantly emphasizing “proper behavior,” and people were quick to report their good deeds to her. She put a lot of stock in wives being submissive and accepting of what their husbands said or did. I heard her counsel a woman whose husband physically abused her to “be diplomatic, do what he asks and don’t argue with him. Under no circumstance leave him, for what will you do then? How will you live, and how will your children grow up without a father’s support?” She was scornful of women who didn’t know how “to handle” their husbands and get what they wanted. Even the strong-willed Ansaf always dutifully asked her husband’s permission to go with me after hours, knowing he wouldn’t refuse a favor to me.

One day when we were visiting families, Ansaf remarked that we would next drop in on a woman who had been “very naughty”: “I will have to say some unpleasant things to her.” The previous day, the woman had told Ansaf she had quarreled with her husband and wanted Ansaf to talk with him. Ansaf refused and told her to return to her husband and beg his forgiveness for her bad behavior. The source of the problem was the death of the woman’s brother in her village near Assiut. She had gone there for several weeks to stay with her mother. Now in Cairo, holidays were approaching when it was customary to mourn at the grave of a relative, and she wanted to return to Assiut. Her husband refused to let her go because he said she needed to care for him. Ansaf seized on the matter of the money it would require to travel to Assiut: “It would take at least five pounds, which would feed your family for a month. Your husband is right and you shouldn’t go.”

One of the criteria Ansaf applied when she distributed gifts was whether family members conformed to her behavioral expectations. Families with able-bodied fathers (19 percent) were excluded from payments or only given token amounts, since males should support their families and welfare payments might insult their ability to provide. Widows and other female heads of household (61 percent) were given money because they were not expected to go out and work. The exceptions were widows with “rich” sons who “have many doors open to them.” However, token amounts might be given to the widows who were supported by sons-in-law, since this was a “shameful” situation and it was good for the widows to have “a face-saving amount.” Ansaf used the welfare payments to reinforce the model behaviors she stressed in her sermons.

Maintaining harmony within the family was promoted as a core issue in stabilizing the community. Even the setup of the center reinforced basic ideals of family life where men handled the finances and women did the work of caring for others. The priest or *abuna* (our father), as he was called, assumed the authority role of father-husband in the center and, with the women, the paternalistic role of disciplinarian. Abuna Aziz presided over events at the center to remind everyone that he was the titular head of Bulaq Center activities. He

formally gave out holiday gifts to the women even though he barely had any contact with them otherwise. Ansaf and the rest of the staff prepared the lists and gifts and distributed tickets to the eligible. At the event, the priest's wife Mme Aziz located the gift and handed it to him, and he in turn, handed it to the correct recipient who was pointed out by Ansaf. The symbolism was not lost on members, since as Ansaf never failed to remind me, "Gifts should be given from the hand of the giver"—in this case, making the priest seem the beneficent giver.

The rewards of conforming were understood through the sermons to be spiritual and to last into the next life, suggesting in this case, that religion was being offered as an "opiate" to encourage Christians to accept their lower-class conditions and assume behaviors that maintained the status quo. Indeed, the stress on family obligations made for a comparatively "normal family life" in Bulaq when compared to the family disruptions found in poor communities of other countries. From the perspective of church officials, board members, and their affluent supporters, disruptions among Christian families were to be avoided or they could have serious consequences for Christians across Egypt. The question arises, however, whether those who promoted these values for the lower classes would themselves have accepted the self-denial and conformity they asked of the Bulaq Christians.

Linking Christians of Different Classes

An undeniable contribution of the Bulaq Center was the nexus it provided for joining the needs of the poor with resources of more affluent Christians. The connections were rarely personal: the affluent donated money, bought handicrafts, and contributed commodities such as food to ongoing programs. Mme Habib and Mme Ansaf used these contacts to procure jobs and medical services not normally available to the poor. Behind the charitable intention of helping the poor, these supporters had much the same aims as church officials of stabilizing the community and discouraging poor, vulnerable Christians from leaving the church. Their contributions were seen as offsetting any attractions Muslims might offer.

Mme Habib arranged for a Christian doctor to examine the eyes of the center's members free of charge. The doctor determined that several women needed simple eye operations—to remove "in-turning eyelashes," as they were called, that caused scarring of their corneas. The doctor agreed to perform the operation in the hospital where she worked. For several weeks, Ansaf and I took small groups for their operations and brought them home blindfolded on the trolley—some for their first ever ride on public transport. The operation saved the eyesight of several of the women.

Focusing on Women as Purveyors of Values

An Egyptian proverb says that it is women who transmit culture, meaning in this case, social values. And although political reasons dictated it, the fact that the center focused its program entirely on women may have been the most effective way to achieve the implicit goals of Christian community. In impoverished Bulaq, women found it easier to fulfill the feminine roles that brought them social approval than men with their financial-support roles. When women needed help, for example with domestic duties—say at a special family event—there were always nearby women readily available to exchange services with them. Consequently, all else being equal, women had fewer unfulfilled obligations creating tensions in their relationships. They also possessed sources of power that in Bulaq, might arguably be considered more important than in other levels of Egyptian society. These included control over children, sex, marriage, honor, and family reputation. Add to this women's more flexible schedules and it was apparent why they had time to tap into the modest resources of the center, including besides material advantages, the chance to become part of a network of supportive Christians. Women, in other words, controlled the resources and processes fraught with implications for the stability, morality, and continuity of Christian community.

It is not unusual in the Arab world for this to happen—for women to become the flexible instruments that sustain family life when conditions are abnormal. They expand their activities to fill gaps in the work force, in family income, and in institutional life when men do not adequately fulfill expected roles in these areas. And another advantage, women assume these tasks in an unthreatening way. In the early days of the center, as we noted, church authorities realized that activities for men were seen as threatening by the government and so they disbanded these programs and turned exclusively to helping women. If the goal was more stable families and community life, this refocusing on women made obvious sense.

A focus on women as the core of Christian community was also important because of the contrast with the Muslim community. There men rather than women were the most active participants. Muslim males gathering in mosques were not (or at least not at the time) seen as threatening but rather as people simply showing piety. The Islamic faith has, from its inception, stressed the importance of men praying in public locations with other men, while women observed their faith at home nearer their responsibilities. Because Muslim men were more exposed to the teachings of Islam, they were charged with greater responsibility for setting moral standards in the home and ensuring that children were grounded in their faith.

The two groups also addressed poverty differently. Poor Christians in Bulaq blamed poverty for their problems, while their affluent supporters blamed them for not taking advantage of available opportunities and gave them only modest help. Muslims in the late 1970s, by contrast, were organizing in a much more effective way through mosque-related programs that provided tutoring, subsidized clothing, food, health care, and even transportation for lower-class students. This help admittedly was accompanied by a heavy dose of conservative preaching that reinforced the “back to religion” trend of the time. While the Christian charitable organization, as judged by Bulaq Center standards, offered a token of what was needed to assist poor Christians, Muslims were addressing a broad range of the poor’s problems in a meaningful way with the help of volunteers. And they were doing it in a respectful way that preserved people’s dignity.

Modeling Community Values

While messages extolling appropriate behavior were being communicated in sermons at churches and the center’s religious services, the staff of these institutions often modeled contradictory behaviors that diluted the messages. Priests, for example, who ran institutions for the poor, with a few noteworthy exceptions, acted as negative examples of “Christian values.” Many came from the lower classes themselves and entered the poorly paid priesthood not out of conviction as much as necessity when their academic performance closed off other options. The ones we met in charge of Coptic Christian institutions invariably asked for payments and consequently earned a reputation for avarice and corruption. I came to know of an Episcopal priest who sold food rations donated for the poor and skimmed money from charitable contributions. One priest demanded monthly fees to keep “our” orphans in his supposedly free orphanage. Another retired with his “meager” salary and bought an expensive apartment in an affluent suburb of Cairo. The one well-known exception in Bulaq was a Catholic priest from a small congregation who visited the poor regardless of their denomination and was much admired in the area. Bulaq Christians responded to priestly indifference by attending formal church services only at special holiday events or when joining provided handouts.

Staff members of the Bulaq Center—mostly teachers—were also not models of kindness and charity. With modest educations and salaried jobs, they saw themselves as socially above their students and frequently treated them harshly. When outsiders visited the classes, however, their demeanor changed, and they spoke with exaggerated kindness and respectful deference to the “aunts” who visited. This was especially true of the unmarried teachers who hoped polite behavior might translate into marriage offers. What they modeled was not so much church expectations of good behavior as the general Egyptian view

that private behavior was not important as long as public behavior left a good impression on others. Another was the expectation that young women who were “sweetly submissive” made good marriage material. Upward mobility even of the most rudimentary kind seemed to require disdain for those left behind to emphasize the distance separating them. On the positive side, however, these staff served as role models for sticking with education long enough to acquire what was a rare commodity in Bulaq, a regularly paid job.

Mme Ansaf, on the other hand, exemplified a person who had so internalized Christian values that she never (in my observation) deviated from them. She began work at the Bulaq Center as the knitting teacher but, by 1974, had replaced the center’s social worker, who was fired for demanding food and favors from the poor in exchange for registering them for the center’s stipend. At first church authorities hesitated to give Ansaf the job because she lacked the academic credentials of the former social worker. But in the end, she was the only one who knew the alleyways of Bulaq well enough to find members’ homes and so officially became the center’s social worker. I noticed almost immediately in the hospitable environment of Bulaq that Ansaf never accepted drinks or food during visits to the poor. We might drink a cup of tea or coffee in the homes of relatively well-off Christian members or Muslims where a refusal might be construed as an insult, but it was clear in these homes that there was never any quid pro quo required for Ansaf’s help.

By almost any definition, Ansaf was an extraordinary charity worker. She claimed that her empathy for the poor came as a child from watching her grandmother going door to door helping the poor and was reinforced later in her Protestant missionary school, where “community service” was stressed. Most of it, however, probably came from her naturally sympathetic personality. Many times I saw her reach into her own purse and pull out money to pay for medicines or school fees for the needy. In fact, most of her modest salary (the equivalent of \$30 a month at the time) went for these “good causes.”

Another remarkable quality in Ansaf was that she demanded dignified behavior in her interactions with the poor, including those with me. A common response of a poor person seeing an “affluent” stranger was to grovel in hopes of receiving a handout. Ansaf immediately stopped this kind of behavior and demanded a dignified, respectful relationship. Indeed, she praised women who gave me gifts such as a piece of flatbread coming from relatives in a village. When I asked how I might reciprocate, she suggested healthy fruit or nuts instead of the sweets they might have preferred.

During the five years I spent with Ansaf in Bulaq, these traits of unbelievable goodness never changed. What kept her from being an overly saccharine “church worker” was her mischievous sense of humor that served her well when chastising unworthy petitioners or delivering unwelcome news. “So you

thought you could fool me into thinking you needed a welfare payment?" she would say with a twinkle in her eye, and we would all laugh, albeit it with chagrin on the part of the victim. These were the ways she gently modeled behavior standards for Bulaq Center members and for the community at large.

Summary

This chapter has described the Christian religious community in Bulaq as one of shared beliefs and concerns that differ from those of the majority of Egyptians. The goals of this community, identified mainly through members' discussions and reactions rather than their expressed vision, were threefold: preventing disruptions within the Christian community, keeping vulnerable Christians from converting to Islam, and maintaining congenial relations with Muslims. These goals did not come from thoughtful organization or planning but rather originated from Christian concerns that their survival depended on achieving these goals.

The Bulaq Center played a central role in this community by providing a safe place for Christians to gather and a convenient venue for authorities to communicate essential messages. While not always clear from the material point of view why Christians attended the center, they must have felt sufficiently satisfied socially and emotionally to want to continue. Through its buildings, staff, programs, and services, the Bulaq Center provided a tangible reminder to local Muslims and Christians that a larger Christian community existed in Egypt with commitments of support to the Christians of Bulaq.

Could these "Christian goals" be accomplished without the center? Maybe not in a place like Bulaq. Certainly the energetic Mme Ansaf constantly moving through the neighborhoods and modeling correct behaviors was a necessary part of achieving success. In the 1970s, this helped defuse the ever present readiness for family and sectarian conflict in a poor quarter like Bulaq.

CHAPTER 6

Personal Relations in Creating Boundaries

An implicit goal of the church was to maintain the stability of the Christian community in Bulaq. This entailed exhorting Christians to support one another emotionally and materially, to resolve conflicts within the community, and to provide resources that, although minimal, might keep members from defecting. Joseph (1999) cautions that personhoods emerge as neither individualist nor corporatist and that human beings have to be socialized to value linkage, bonding, and sociability. This chapter looks not so much at how these patterns develop but what their implications are once they become norms. Specifically it looks at how patterns of personal relations encourage support within the community and in their own way create boundaries between Christian and Muslim communities. As Barth (1969) notes, identity is a relational process involving boundaries that define who is to be included or excluded—frequently by using kinship idioms to clarify the categories.

Creating Expectations

Generally speaking, Egyptian culture¹ tends to organize personal relations around obligations. This tendency is consistent with a culture that emphasizes loyalty to groups—family, religious, and ethnic. While this is a generalized Egyptian expectation, there are important differences in how Muslims and Christians view these obligations.

The Muslim perspective on obligations derives in part from principles that were laid down before at least the thirteenth century in schools of Sunni jurisprudence. After the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, Sunni religious scholars gathered human behaviors into five categories: behaviors that were obligatory, recommended, morally neutral, reprehensible, or forbidden under Islam. The scholars based their judgments on the Koran and the Hadith (reports of what

the Prophet said and did). They disagreed, however, on the interpretation and authenticity of the sources, and as a consequence, four schools of Sunni jurisprudence emerged from their differences.² The Shi'i scholars established a fifth school. These principles form the basis of shari'a Islamic law, and judges still refer to them in their decisions.³

Many Muslims believe these principles give a detailed guide for how God wants them to live their lives. Salvation comes from submitting to the will of God and sincerely living a moral life. Because some of these principles are worded in ambiguous ways, individuals must decide what behaviors God wants them to follow. They can ask advice of those they respect but no human being is authorized to translate God's message for others. One source of advice in the 1970s was newspaper columns where readers asked questions and religious sheikhs answered them. Sometimes writers asked what seemed frivolous questions,⁴ but in effect, the letters showed the importance people felt for making sure their behavior was correct.

Christians, on the other hand, draw inspiration for their morality from biblical stories, homilies in sermons, and from the behavior of respected community members. Their obligations are not codified into law as they are in Islamic shari'a. For this reason, Christians' expectations about personal behavior must be learned from others in each generation. This is why places to gather and persons like Ansaf are important in conveying the community expectations. If Ansaf had been another type of personality, such as the social worker who preceded her, the community might have viewed their religious obligations more cynically, but in Ansaf, they had the personification of what it was to be a good Christian.

The point here is that Egyptians—whether Christian or Muslim—frame their moral behavior largely in terms of obligations to others and not expectations about their inherent rights. The implication is that religious authorities in both communities, in theory at least, only needed to activate what were already well-established expectations about correct behaviors.

Applying the Rules

Bailey defines social structure as “sets of rules regulating behavior between persons and groups.” He says the purpose is to redress “the balance upset by the passage of individuals through their life's cycle, and [to control] disturbances arising from the acts of deviants.”⁵

In Egypt, formal relations are characterized in terms of obligations or duties (*wagib*)⁶ to specified others—for example, family members and relatives—while informal relations are characterized more by favors (*ma'ruf*) offered voluntarily to unspecified others—for example, friends or strangers.

Family Relations

The obligations owed to specified family members were known and reasonably well complied with in the Egypt of the 1970s. They were taught to children in the usual ways: through word of mouth, parental example, invectives against those who don't conform, and gossip approving or disapproving other's behavior. Daily in Bulaq, children routinely heard people burnishing their reputations with exaggerated tales of their own and family members' exemplary behavior. These tales were meant to show a narrator's respectability and adherence to communal norms. Children learned to behave accordingly, especially in public where reputations were formed. Additionally they learned to keep secret any behaviors that might compromise their families' reputations.

To illustrate behaviors that define "a good person," we can start with family obligations as they played out in Bulaq. It was understood, for example, that model father-husbands should be effective breadwinners and represent the family as necessary in public life. This meant earning sufficient income for family needs, registering births and marriages with authorities, applying for and renewing identity cards, paying utility bills, even doing shopping in some cases. They were also ultimately responsible for exerting necessary controls over members' public behavior to ensure their family's pristine reputation.

Wife-mothers should be nurturers, serving the needs of their husbands and children and carrying out the practical day-to-day care of the household. They should be obedient to their husbands and loving and tender with children. Children must be respectful and obedient to adults after they pass the age of coddling at around five. When they reached adulthood, they were expected to be financially (males) and emotionally (females) supportive of their parents. Overall, men were held to more "legalistic" standards of support, while women were judged in more "qualitative" ways by the atmosphere they created in their households and the way they raised their children. Being considered weaker in character, however, they could be forgiven overly emotional reactions such as spoiling their children or reacting too violently in crises. Still, women were considered the stable core around which households in Bulaq revolved and were held responsible for their own moral behavior.

This moral superstructure of expectations was the way things should be, but of course, as in all human endeavors, much went awry. While men should be the ultimate authorities and overseers in families, they were often the last to know what happened in their homes when they were away. The women in fact made most of the everyday decisions and ultimately were the main purveyors of moral values within the family.

Each spouse knew his or her role and indeed was "protected" from distractions in carrying out obligations. Women, for example, were not called on to

earn money nor men to do housework. But there were situations when a woman had to earn money to make up for the absence of a breadwinner or when a husband's wages were insufficient. However, if she did go out to do housecleaning or took up piecework, she would often conceal the fact so the world didn't know of her husband's inadequacy. Men and women earned respect, all else being equal, to the extent that they fulfilled their assigned roles. Yet when circumstances required them to step outside these roles, their neighbors usually showed surprising levels of tolerance as long as they understood the necessity for the change. They understood, for example, that the loud, rather coarse banter of the woman who sold soft drinks on the street and wore men's clothing was only because she wanted others to treat her as they would a man in the same situation.⁷ Although what she did violated usual norms, people admired the fact that she supported her children in as respectable a manner as she could.

Social norms were often compromised in Bulaq when poverty intervened. Men didn't always earn as much as their families needed, and women weren't always the most proficient cooks or nurturers. Men found it harder than women to fulfill their obligations, given their limited educations and the scarcity of jobs with adequate pay. Many worked in "pick-up" employment carrying bundles in a nearby train station or peddling vegetables. Harsh employers and corrupt government officials often unfairly denied them benefits and knew they would not complain. Crises like death, sickness, and aging put additional strains on family resources.

Since masculine pride in Bulaq rested on earnings and reputation, some men felt frustrated by their failures and turned to abusing family members or losing themselves in drugs. But large numbers amazingly remained good family members despite their failures. The fact that few fully met their obligations did not change the fact that most believed that they should be able to do so.

These were the generalized expectations of wives and husbands, but there were other more specific obligations related to families. To be "good," children should obey their parents and provide services for them without being asked, and the parents, in turn, should show responsibility for them—providing for their basic needs, educating them, and eventually seeing them married and settled into their adult lives. Each child's relation with a parent was slightly different from every other child's relation with that parent because of sex and age differences.

The same differences in obligations were true for siblings. Older siblings felt responsible for younger ones, while the younger ones deferred to their older siblings and, depending on their sex, performed certain services for one another. Female siblings, for example, were expected to serve males food and drink and make them comfortable, while the males were expected to protect their sisters and provide financial support if necessary when they were older.

The character of men's and women's specific *wagibs* (duties) therefore differed. Women's *wagibs* tended to be more service-oriented—helping to prepare food, caring for children, and supporting others emotionally—while men's were more material and public—financial support, material gifts, and running errands in public where men moved more freely and had more authority. Women tended to carry out *wagibs* more privately. Although it was “shameful” for a woman to accept support from a son-in-law, a daughter might quietly help her mother out of her household money.⁸ One daughter, for example, quietly contrived to help her mother fulfill her *wagib* of giving holiday gifts to her grandchildren by providing money from her (the daughter's) account. This allowed the mother, and indirectly the daughter, “to save face” without the husband or his family knowing.

The story did not end there; this same daughter moving into her husband's house owed unlimited services to her mother-in-law, while her mother-in-law owed her little in return and indeed might be her greatest competitor for the affections of her husband. The daughter-in-law's own mother felt obliged to help her daughter put on a good show with her in-laws by helping make sweets at a religious holiday. Even in the new household, the daughter represented her own parents in all she did.

Expectations about “the softer” nature of women were generalized broadly to expectations that maternal relatives, including distant aunts and uncles, would be more indulgent and sympathetic than paternal relatives who should be more controlling and demanding of proper behavior, since their family names were at stake. Maternal aunts were the closest substitutes for mothers, and paternal uncles for fathers, in the eventuality that something happened to either parent.

When it worked, this system provided a well-organized and stable family life with all members performing their duties in relation to one another. When lapses occurred in this less-than-perfect world, people would be criticized for “behaving badly” and for not being “good people.” If the digression were serious enough—such as sexual misbehavior⁹—the perpetrators might face family sanctions, including ostracism. Outsiders often extended their criticism to other family members who they would assume suffered the same deficient background and upbringing. This collective punishment put additional burdens on those who misbehaved.

The important point in familial relations was that obligations were “unbalanced”—no family member owed exactly the same *wagibs* to any other member. Nor could they expect exactly the same *wagibs* in return. Rather, their obligations depended on relative age, role, and sex. And although individual personalities meant there was variety in the way personal relations were carried out, most people wanted to be “good people” and tried to adhere to these rules.

There were consequences to the fact that no two people in families were equal. The “positive” aspect was that duties were clear-cut and different, and competition and conflict were reduced. The intimate family group stayed tightly knit as long as everyone performed his or her part. The “negative” aspect was that members who resisted their roles strained family ties and, in extreme cases, faced family sanctions. When a gap was left by a missing or poorly performing member, families had difficulty functioning normally. When husbands died, women had to find replacement income, and when wives died, men needed the help of women. Often female relatives helped a man out until, in the usual case, they found new wives. Poverty and illiteracy complicated this situation for women, since it was not usual for uneducated women to work, and it was almost unheard-of for a woman with children to remarry.

One might ask where the “fairness” was in a system of unequal exchanges among family members. All else being equal, fairness came from a lifetime of everyone dutifully performing their *wagibs*. Then although the young had to show more deference and perform more services for their elders when young, eventually they assumed more decision-making and authority roles as they grew older. In other words, if all went well—if no one escaped their duties—the benefits and liabilities would equal out over time. This reinforced conservative views among young people to keep the system alive if they wanted someday to enjoy the authority and control roles.

But again, in the real world, there were many reasons this didn’t always happen—not the least of which was the fact that public education was becoming common in the 1970s. School required outside responsibilities and independence and gave young people skills and earnings beyond those of their parents, making it harder for them to always defer to their authority. Still despite these conditions, young people in Bulaq mostly acted in their daily lives as though maintaining “a good-person” image was worth the effort. This was despite the fact that young people in the poorer classes sometimes had a hard time meeting the basic expectations of their elders and might take shortcuts in fulfilling their duties that were not always appreciated.

Nonkin Relations

The other main category of personal relations that contrasted with kin relations was those with “stranger-outsiders.” The duties owed to these nonkin were more diffuse and more voluntary. For example to be a “good person,” one should offer assistance to any needy stranger, such as someone trying to find a street address, or more generally offering a passerby the hospitality of a cup of tea.

Unlike the “unbalanced and specific” obligations of kinship, those offered to nonkin were “balanced and unspecified” and more voluntary. Although shaped

too by age, sex, and role, all else being equal, these “outsider” relationships required reciprocal rather than hierarchical obligations.¹⁰ Long-term relations with nonkin might even be more demanding than for kin, since they needed to be carefully calibrated to avoid tensions. Unlike blood links that endured forever, relations with nonkin lasted only as long as both sides continued visits and gifts.

The way it worked was that relations with outsiders might start with a gift or service proffered voluntarily as a *maʿruf* (favor). The recipient was expected to return the favor with something of similar or greater value. Not to give anything or something of much less value would be seen as a rebuff and could lead eventually to termination of the relationship. After the initial exchange of gifts or services, more exchanges might take place in proportion to the desired intensity of the relationship, until someone failed to reciprocate or the return was less than expected and the relationship faltered or stopped. Watching this process in Bulaq, it seemed that relationships rarely reached stasis and were either growing or subsiding. There could be extenuating circumstances, such as when one person moved too far away to keep up the exchange or neighbors with little in common only exchanged food on formal occasions. One common tradition that manifested this process was for a neighbor to send food in a dish and for the recipient to return the dish filled with food items of rough equivalence or more.

The fairly quick return of a gift was important because as long as the gift-giving came from one side only, the receiver remained a debtor in a “patron-client” relationship. Powerful people sometimes took advantage of this situation to project strength by providing hospitality and gifts that recipients could not reciprocate. People tried to avoid such compromising positions if possible, since it affected their public reputations. Even when the poor accepted meals from neighbors, they were able to preserve their dignity by performing tasks in return, such as walking children to school or running errands.

The poverty of some in Bulaq gave them no recourse other than to seek charity from others. This was more easily accepted from “rich” relatives who were obliged to help family members in need. Accepting such one-sided help did not lead to the same shame as help from nonkin. Another acceptable form of help was from impersonal institutions such as churches, mosques, or the Bulaq Center. Rich people were by general opinion obligated to give to those who had less, which suggests a reason for the emphasis on charity among Bulaq Center board members. Even those with modest means in Bulaq routinely gave to street beggars if they felt themselves better off. Few people in Bulaq willingly revealed household income for fear poorer neighbors would see them as rich and demand help or cast an evil eye on them if they didn’t. The point here is

that keeping up roughly reciprocal exchanges with nonkin was important in maintaining a good public image.

At times in Bulaq, *wagibs* were accounted in a public way, such as at marriages and funerals. Then the measure of a relationship was taken publically. For each gift of money or food given to a family at their event, a like amount was expected in return when the giver had a comparable event. It was not uncommon for friends of a bride, for example, to remind a forgetful acquaintance that she had not reciprocated adequately. Refusal to provide gifts or attend such important events as condolences were acts that ranked among those that people never forgave.

Reassigning Relationships

The dilemma came when certain categories of people fit somewhere between kin and nonkin outsiders. These people might be close family or personal friends and neighbors, close work colleagues, or old school mates. They were owed more than the equally balanced gifts and services of nonkin, but their “outsider” relationships did not clearly specify what obligations were required. People in this situation had two choices: The first was to put these individuals in recognized categories of nonkin—school mates (*dufa*), close friends (*shilla*),¹¹ and coreligionists—where their common affiliation required a certain amount of mutual help (e.g., in finding jobs or obtaining promotions) without necessarily expecting an immediate return.

The second option was to redefine the relationship as a kin-like one. For example, a person might routinely begin calling someone “sister,” “aunt,” “uncle,” “grandfather”—whatever label best fit the sex and age of the person and the kind of relationship that he or she hoped to have. Then both knew what to expect from the relationship—whether temporary or long term. A young woman, for example, meeting her mother’s friend on the street might greet her as “aunt” (using the mother’s sister term *khalla*) and then they would both know that the older woman should show warmth toward the younger one and the younger one should perform helpful tasks for her in return as to a mother. This reassignment could also occur with strangers on the street to set a frame for their interactions. “Aunty, can you tell me where I can find the railway station?” the younger might ask. When best friends called each other “sister” and kept up constant contact, the reassignment could be long term and take on some of the character of a real kinship relation. Ansaf and I called one another “sister” for almost 40 years, which meant, in our case, that we shared our secret concerns and trusted one another to keep them private.

When Christians were exhorted to help other Christians, they were being asked to think of them as a special category of people who were “more than strangers although less than kin.” Building on this, the sermons described the

kinds of support Christians should offer one another, as well as how the interests of the Christian community made it imperative that they maintain “correct” relations with Muslims¹². As far as Christians were concerned, Muslims were consummate “outsiders,” and as such, they were treated differently from insider kin and quasi-insider coreligionists. As a consequence, Ansaf and others had to make sure the line drawn around the Christians members would not so exclude Muslims that they would feel offended.

The Consequences of Deviance

A final point about those who deviated from behavioral norms in Bulaq was that others never seemed to forget them. When Ansaf wanted to identify a woman to me, she would always describe a signature event that defined the woman (sometimes in front of the woman herself). The event might entail the woman’s bad behavior or some extraordinary action perpetrated against her, and thereafter she would always be known as “X the woman where such and such happened.” One such example was M., “who went to jail when her husband concealed drugs in her home.” In this case, she was an object of pity, but nonetheless the entire family was flawed by his behavior. The story was the following:

M., who came from Bani Suef, was married to a man who fell in love with another woman. He tried to abandon his wife by moving to Cairo, but she took their son and found him in the city. He abandoned her once again after planting drugs in their apartment and calling the police. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison but after six was released for good behavior. Ansaf found her a room and gave her a monthly allowance for food.

Summary

This chapter has described patterns of personal relations in Egypt, showing how differences in obligations distinguished relations among kin, especially affiliated persons, and nonkin. Family constituted the primary group with defined and enduring sets of obligations. Coreligionists and people with special status made up a second group with more fluid obligations. Finally, nonkin outsiders constituted a third category where exchanges were roughly equal to avoid a patron-client situation. From the Christian perspective, Muslims constituted the bulk of this third group, implying that they should be treated at the very least with polite helpfulness.

There were two important consequences of these expectations for the Christian community. The first was that the different expectations about treatment immediately created boundaries around the groups. For Christians, the closest were kin, the next closest coreligionists, and the most distant were Muslims.

The second consequence was that Christian staff such as Ansaf, with a mission to further the Christian community, had only to urge members to apply general behavioral expectations toward others that were already embedded in their psyches.

The relationships visible to an outsider like me of course were only a small fraction of the complex network of personal relations in Bulaq. And while, in theory, exchanges should always be unequal with kin and equal with nonkin, in real life, relationships were constantly being manipulated and recalibrated. The sensitivity in matters of relationship seemed to create people who were unusually conscious of unspoken meanings below the surface of others' behaviors.

A point that emerges from these observations is significant for the study of societies generally. A society that emphasizes obligations over rights is likely to be one that also prefers communal organization over an organization of equal individuals. The tighter the fabric of social units, such as families, the more likely personal relations will reflect at least part of this Egyptian obligation model. The unequal obligations of kin differentiate members' roles so that each person's contribution becomes necessary to the well-being of the others. Societies, on the other hand, which homogenize people by treating them all equally, will tend to have attachments that are fragile and not likely to endure as well over time. This latter type of society was essentially how Egyptians viewed Western culture, as comprised of self-interested individuals unable and unwilling to commit to others in a long-term way.

CHAPTER 7

Communicating the Messages of Christian Community

Another reason patterns of personal relations were important was because of the role they played in the communication of community information. This chapter looks at personal networks in a broader sense and describes how, why, and by whom community messages are passed. Most messages were of a practical nature, about when meetings were to be held or hand-outs distributed, but additionally, networks were vehicles for raising issues and discussing values. The networks also constituted a stage on which members exhibited their own exemplary behaviors and exerted social pressure on others to maintain community norms. These were all critically important aspects of maintaining a community of shared beliefs and norms.

The “Natural” Networks of Bulaq¹

Communications naturally followed networks of personal relationships, facilitating the flow in some cases and obstructing them in others. The closeness of kin eased the flow depending on the factors of age and sex and the feeling of trust within the inner circle. With nonkin, people were more careful in the kinds of messages they relayed, avoiding messages of an intimate or derogatory nature and instead using these audiences to enhance reputations. With friends and better known nonkin, there might be a balanced exchange where “you tell me this and I’ll tell you that.”

Despite the more limited range of their activities, women’s networks tended to be more efficient than men’s in Bulaq in communicating news. Much of what travelled through them might not even reach the men. While loyal to family interests, women tended to be more emotionally drawn to one another and showed more sympathy when someone else was in crisis. Men interacted with men in more formal ways and rarely revealed personal details in public.

This was another reason it made sense for the Bulaq Center to focus on drawing women together and using them to pass on the values of the Christian community.

Men and women differed in the ways and even the venues where they communicated news. Both met acquaintances in passing on the street where the extended nature of polite greetings gave opportunities for exchanging news: Good morning. How are you? How is your family? (This led sometimes to inquiring after the health of specific family members.) Almost any casual exchange could turn into a fairly long conversation. A person in a hurry or speaking with casual acquaintances invariably answered these questions positively—"Everyone is fine"—even though the news might be quite the opposite. Women, more than men, would be likely to divulge specific family information about, for example, health issues that were worrying them, and when time was not a factor, they might exchange more personal news over a cup of tea in their homes or on door stoops. Still most held back private information if it might reflect badly on themselves or their family members.

Men greeting men, by contrast, were less likely to communicate personal feelings and information. When greeting women acquaintances in public, they would not extend the conversation beyond what was necessary to be polite, lest others think there was something going on between them. The places for men's leisurely conversations were coffee shops where, for the price of a cup of tea or coffee, men could spend all evening with male friends. Bantering talk, however, was more common than personal talk even among those who knew each other well. Men could ask one another generally about their "families," but it was not considered polite to ask specifically about female members, although they might do so if the women were either well known to the questioner or elderly.

The greater impersonality of men's talk meant messages and gossip moved more slowly through their networks than through the efficient and overlapping clusters of female communicators. Although "good" women were supposed to spend most of their time at home, even the most conservative had to leave her home at some point² to go to public water taps, shop for food, walk children to school, or purchase goods from street vendors—all venues approved for women as long as the nature of their errand was clear and they didn't loiter. Each of these locations had strategically located individuals: the caretaker of a water tap, the street-corner seller, store clerks, and school guards who were aware of who went where and what the latest news was. The most popular establishments were those that readily dispensed news along with their services. Male storekeepers might be somewhat less ready to engage in gossip, and for this reason, women preferred other women as strategic nodes in their networks. The best were women who squatted at intersections selling food or going door to door selling household items or substituting in the shops while their men rested.

They were the ones Ansaf asked when trying to locate a member's house, since they would likely know where she lived, if she were home, and what problems had recently plagued her family. If women could, they stopped by these "nodes" to gather up-to-date news. The most common phrase starting a conversation in Bulaq was, "What's your news?"

Women's most intimate networks included neighbors, nearby relatives, and people they saw daily while doing their chores. It was easy to see the closeness of women when they gathered together. They touched one another, joked back and forth, exchanged and even nursed each other's babies, and did small errands for one another. They shared clothes-washing spaces in stairwells or between buildings or gathered to sew clothing or complete embroideries for the center. They combined bread- and holiday sweet-making chores, with each woman contributing her specialized part to the operation. Often they gathered on their common stairs or stoops to prepare food together, cutting and chopping and asking older "experts" for their advice in making dishes. Closeness also led to quarrels and disagreements over shared spaces and issues such as the best way to make certain dishes.

Food preparation in particular separated the spheres of women and men and was not an activity that was interrupted by a neighbor dropping in; she simply joined in with the chopping. Bonds grew between women neighbors as a result of sharing these tasks and airing their problems and concerns over children. It was even possible for a foreign woman to enter this world of women and feel that her "woman-ness" overcame her "foreign-ness" for a brief time.

A good part of weekdays in Bulaq and Qulali were exclusively the province of women and young children, with only an occasional man passing through or sleeping late at home. Turning a corner quickly, one might come across a woman doing an impromptu belly dance for the amusement of her friends and then it was immediately clear that no men or potential critics were in the vicinity. An additional layer of restraint was removed for Christian women when they came together without Muslims nearby. Meeting alone with no men present freed women to drop their stiff public demeanors and expose their often vivid social personalities to those they trusted. Even then, they never forgot their personal images and stayed well within the bounds of propriety.

The close proximity of living spaces in Bulaq frustrated the efforts of people to keep all aspects of their lives private. Doors were ill-fitting and not thick enough to prevent the hearing of private conversations, and rooftops where food products were dried and laundry hung looked down on the private spaces of neighbors. All this meant neighbors could not avoid knowing what went on in the households surrounding them. There were few secrets in Bulaq.

The Uses of Information

In resource-poor Bulaq, information was a significant source of power that people used judiciously. A woman might, for example, withhold information until she could gain an advantage—perhaps to establish a greater intimacy with another woman or to gain a piece of “hot” news in return. On the other hand, it could work to her advantage to be the first to know or to be a “node” in the information chain.

People shied away from bearing bad news. According to the midwife, Nargus, a classic example was finding someone to tell a father that the newly arrived baby was a girl and not the hoped-for boy. Spreading negative gossip carried the risk of retaliation by the victim who might then spread her own bits of unsavory news or cast a spell on the perpetrator. It was not good to gain a reputation for being too eager to spread or receive negative news. Commonly people hearing negative news about someone added their own positive statement—“But she does this (good thing)” —to show they were not complicit in spreading only negative news. Reputation was so important in Bulaq that most women were careful about saying anything that hurt a person’s or her own family’s image. Indeed, women were so fearful of attracting the evil eye that they usually acted quickly after they cooled down to resolve any conflicts they might have with others. That being generally true, however, few refrained from using a juicy bit of gossip to show their own “purity” in disapproving the negative behavior in question.

What sometimes happened was that women confided their secrets to other women in a burst of friendly feeling and then regretted it later when a quarrel erupted or the secret spread. Only the most vindictive, however, confided personal information across sex boundaries, knowing the havoc it could wreck on families if husbands or male neighbors came to know of misbehavior. Women trusted other women to support them and to be discrete where men were concerned. If a husband came home unexpectedly and his wife was out without permission, a neighbor invariably provided an appropriate excuse and scurried off to warn her. On the other hand, neighbors might tell the discrete Ansaf that a woman no longer needed welfare payments because she had a new source of income. Good relations with neighbors were a must in Bulaq to encourage their support and prevent the malicious harm they had the power to inflict. For the rural migrants to Bulaq, living among “strangers” created a different environment from that they experienced in their home villages where they felt confident their interests with relatives coincided.

Ansaf discouraged the spread of negative news but was not above using the information to praise or scold people to their face. She often told me stories about people in Bulaq that were too negative to say to the persons themselves,

telling the stories with a tone of exasperation as if to say, “What can one do with such an impossible case?”

Naturally, not all news was negative, and there was merit in being the first to notify others about the good news of births, graduations, engagements, and marriages, or the return of travelers. This news gave recipients a chance to make timely congratulatory visits. For children, “good news” might even warrant a tip.

Communicating through Storytelling

Most middle-aged and older residents in Bulaq never went to school or went for such a short time they were essentially illiterate. Consequently, they were more comfortable transmitting messages verbally and assimilating information aurally. The most common way to make a point was through storytelling. This was especially true when conveying moral points.³ Listeners were more likely to be convinced if the teller claimed the story was true. For that reason, stories were usually told about a named person, place, or time, all somewhat removed from the moment so embellishments could not be checked. Such stories made abstractions concrete and memorable.

A common beginning was “There was a woman in my village named So-and-So . . .” The story went on to recount how the woman in question violated a norm and suffered dreadful consequences. Although said to be true, the fanciful details soon made it apparent that the story was shaped for effect. But for persons in Bulaq who were used to miraculous stories from the Bible told by church authorities, there was no reason to think they were anything but true events.

The stories were usually straightforward and the point clear, but just to make sure, the point might be repeated several times. One such story was told by a mother to her daughter who had left her husband and returned home. The point was to make the daughter return to her husband. The mother started,

There was a woman in our village named N. who was an excellent person in every way except that she refused to sleep with her husband. One day, she died, and shortly thereafter her daughter had a dream that she, the daughter, was standing in the place where decisions are made about whether a person goes to heaven or hell. She looked out one window and saw a woman with a stake driven through one ear and out the other. The daughter was told that the woman listened too much to gossip. In another direction was a woman who “went” with too many men; a dog was biting her in the part of her body where she had committed the sin. Then the daughter heard her mother’s voice telling her not to open the window on the other side. But wanting to see her mother, she disobeyed and saw that her mother was burning in hell. “So you see,” said the narrator, “it doesn’t matter

how good you are in other things; if you don't sleep with your husband, this is what⁴ you can expect."

A second form of storytelling involved "image building." A person would tell a story about himself or herself or a close relative to show the person's praiseworthy behavior: "Yesterday I brought So-and-So some bread I baked because she's been ill for several days." "I walk my daughter to school every day and would never let her go alone." "My family says my *mulakiya* is the best they ever tasted." These statements variously show a woman who watches out for her neighbors, is a careful mother, and is a superb cook, and at the same time burnishes her image as a person who "knows correct behavior."

Most residents of Bulaq had some momentous happening in their previous lives that continued to define them: "She is the woman with a limp that was run over by a car." "She is the one whose son was killed in an accident." Ansaf used these ways of identifying people openly in front of them, and they nodded in assent as if the pathos was a way of gaining sympathy.

Sometimes a sympathetic story was told in the presence of a subject as a way for the narrator to ingratiate herself with the person. If Ansaf was speaking, the point was usually to reward the person for good behavior that she hoped others—especially those listening—would imitate. In this kind of story, the person receiving the acclaim gladly accepted exaggerations of her positive behavior. It was never necessary to stick strictly to true events. Audiences accepted the fact that a point was being made by exaggerating the details.

Besides laudatory stories, Ansaf also related minor infractions of people we met on the street but did it jokingly. She meant the story as a gentle rebuke or cautionary tale to reinforce a value she had in mind. She never spoke publicly about major infractions for fear of insulting people. Ansaf was sensitive to limits beyond which it was dangerous to go. Her intention was to calm rather than create conflicts, but there were times when I held my breath thinking the person who had been the object of her rebuke might cause problems, but it never happened.

A basic pattern for conversation progressed as follows: After relating a positive story of "good" behavior, the narrator would receive some reinforcement from the listeners. Then others would add similar stories and comments to show they too condoned the behavior. Eventually they would arrive at a general consensus about what was or was not proper behavior. In other words, a conversation often started by describing a behavior, then clarifying its implications, and finally negotiating its details such as when extraordinary instances made it especially appropriate or inappropriate. Finally, those listening would arrive at a generally accepted ideal.

Everyone in Bulaq knew, for example, that elderly parents should be cared for by their children and would laud those who did so as “good children,” but everyone also knew cases where parents ended up in charity homes because adult children didn’t have the space or the resources to take care of them. Some praised the children for finding a “good” charity home and visiting them frequently while others might argue that parents should never be sent to such homes no matter what the circumstances. The arguments would go on at length until most agreed on what was usually acceptable but would also accept the fact that extraordinary circumstances might require some other behavior.

Overall, the significant aspect of storytelling and image building was that, through them, people communicated and refined community ideals and connected them to their own behavior, thereby signaling their adoption of idealized values.

Ansaf as Central Communicator

Although one might believe priests should be the formal spokespersons for the church in its everyday dealings with members, they were at a disadvantage in being male and unable to enter homes or spend time with women during the day when husbands were away. As a female and an upstanding official of the center, Ansaf had a significant advantage in communicating with the Christian members.

Besides being a great communicator, her networks were the most extensive and effective in the community. She kept tabs on all the news, on the quarrels between husbands and wives, parents and children, and difficulties between neighbors. She knew who was in financial difficulty, who was graduating, who was involved in marriage negotiations, and who had recently experienced births or deaths in the family. Gathering this kind of news helped her respond wisely when called on to address their needs. The news could be good or bad but it became sanitized when used by Ansaf because people knew she was discrete and her intentions good. The news did not have the pejorative sense of “gossip.”

Ansaf’s network was exceptionally extensive. It consisted of students and teachers at the center, individuals seeking help, families she visited, church authorities, store clerks, vendors, and casual acquaintances she passed on the streets of Bulaq. On some days, the total count of her Christian contacts alone might rise to as many as two hundred. Given the fact that most of these contacts were members of families who had their own networks of relatives and friends, the potential to communicate messages was huge. If she related news of interest, it travelled quickly throughout the community. I remember once hearing her tell a few persons she met in the morning that a food item would be given out at noon, and when the time came, there was a long line waiting. “Good” news

such as this moved quickly, since people hoped to benefit from a recipients' sense of indebtedness for the favor.

The way Ansaf's network worked was best seen through her daily activities. She started the day in the main offices of Reverend Aziz where there was a brief prayer for the staff of the two buildings. She proceeded to the Welfare Center, where she checked attendance in the three classes of literacy and handicrafts and spoke briefly with the 70 or 80 girls and their teachers. After a short time in the class and depending on the day of the week, she greeted women on the way to the midwife's clinic, conducted religious services for roughly one hundred women, cooked a meal for 50 families, or ventured out to see the 20 or so families she visited each week. On her way, she talked with passersby, shopkeepers, and acquaintances. Others sought her in the center to explain special problems. Each of these locations in effect gave her opportunities to exchange news. As she moved from one to another, she adjusted the messages to fit the audience, sometimes conveying practical information and sometimes promoting the values of the community. Once, for example, when a group of Christians were complaining about a Muslim neighbor, she replied with a story about a Muslim woman who had taken care of a bedridden Christian neighbor for years by bringing him food three times a day and doing his laundry. The message had special force—adding a touch of shame to the Christians who in private had little good to say about Muslims and would not themselves have been so generous.

The Wednesday religious meeting, as we have seen, was one of the main places for conveying essential Christian messages. The order of the service accomplished this on several levels: the speaker—most often Ansaf—gave a simple story from the Bible that the Bulaq women could identify with. Next, she made announcements of births, sicknesses, or deaths in the community, and the women would chime in with news she had missed. Ansaf would then ask them to pray for people experiencing problems. Finally, she would encourage them to support these families through goodwill visits and other help. This effort was clearly aimed at promoting cooperation within the Christian community—one of the important implicit goals of the Bulaq Center.

Although many of Ansaf's tasks were explicit in her job description—teaching, administering, visiting the sick, helping the poor—the way she carried them out was what most endeared her to the community—her fairness in distributing the small stipends and gifts; her successes in resolving community quarrels, finding brides and grooms, reconciling husbands and wives; and demonstrating good relations with Muslims. None of these activities would have been possible without her ability to gather and communicate information through her extensive networks. As long as she was the social worker, the center

was the most active organization in Bulaq at resolving the personal problems of the poor.

Summary

The chapter has shown how patterns of personal relations affected the transmission of messages important to Christian community, facilitating or slowing them based on people's relationships as kin or nonkin, male or female, Christian or Muslim. It described the efficient nodes in the communication networks and suggested that people used information judiciously as one of the few sources of power in Bulaq. The vehicle for communicating moral messages was frequently storytelling, where the creative imaginations of residents shaped the details to fit their audiences. Finally, the chapter showed the size and effectiveness of Ansaf's networks and the ways she used messages to promote the interests of the Christian community.

CHAPTER 8

Dispute Resolution in the Community

An implicit goal of the Christian community was to encourage stability and harmony within their own ranks. In Bulaq, this was handled by (1) charity meant to relieve the critical needs of desperately poor Christians, (2) religious services urging mutual support among Christians, and (3) defusing and resolving disputes within the community both between Christian families and between Christians and Muslims. Previous chapters looked at the first two points, while this chapter describes the third—resolving disputes between parties in Bulaq. Mme Ansaf spent considerable time engaged in this effort, often far and above the duties expected of her by the board. While the Church preached conflict resolution, Mme Ansaf practiced it, and in the end, it was probably her most important contribution to the stability of the Bulaq community. The examples start with a case where Christians and Muslims were involved to show a standard negotiating pattern and then goes on to give examples of conflicts within Christian and Muslim families.

Conflicts and the Role of Peacemakers

There were two kinds of cases where Ansaf became involved: conflicts between Christian families and cases where she felt a minor dispute between Muslims and Christians might escalate into something bigger. In the 1970s, Egyptians of the middle and upper classes expressed loyalty to their significant groups: families, friends, and school classmates. For the lower classes, the three main groups were somewhat different: families, neighbors, and coreligionists. Most tried to maintain harmonious relations with members of these groups.

Keeping up personal obligations and exchanging favors were the normal ways of maintaining good relations with members of these groups. Essential also were good manners as a general way of expressing goodwill and avoiding insults. People meeting in a store or on the street, for example, always greeted one another cordially adding a pro forma pleasantry. As the author Anthony

Shadid wrote, “No one enters any room, anywhere in the Arab world, without being greeted. It never happens.”¹ Cordial greetings were part of the culture of civility that Egyptians learned as children. To forget them might be construed as a slight that could lead to serious disruptions in relations.

Although people quarreled over small slights like these, in the end, they usually tried to mend fences as quickly as possible. A major reason was their fear of the problems that might result if enmity continued, such as neighbors or even strangers imposing curses or causing other misfortunes.

The compulsion to resolve quarrels meant there was always someone in Bulaq ready to step in and stop an argument from escalating. If a customer and a shopkeeper were arguing over prices, a passerby would suggest that the shopkeeper split the difference with the customer. If a fistfight erupted in the street, passersby would bodily drag the two combatants apart. The frustrations of life in Bulaq made people quick to take offense. And since the “peacemaker” role was respected, there were always individuals ready to step in and offer their services even with complete strangers.

Patterns for Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts

Ansaf spent considerable time mediating disputes in Bulaq. After watching this many times, it became apparent that she followed a fairly consistent series of steps in resolving disputes—one that because the disputants responded appropriately, seemed to be a recognized pattern in the quarter.

One day, Ansaf had a disagreement with one of the better-off Muslim students in the handicraft class. The argument was over the price of some used clothing that a church member donated to the center. The student, N., wanted to buy the clothes and Ansaf quoted a reasonable price. N. took the clothes home to “try them out” and came back the next day with half the amount that Ansaf asked. Ansaf was angry with N.’s attempt “to bargain with money that would be used for the poor.” In the ensuing argument, N.’s older sister pulled her out the door and took her home, and N. did not return to class for several days.

Ansaf worried about the festering problem. The girl was one of the best students at the center, and it was a pity for her to miss class. Perhaps more important, Ansaf feared the repercussions if her Muslim family escalated the issue and spread rumors about the center and, by extension, Christians of the area. So after a week, Ansaf and I went to make peace with N.’s family. The entire family was there—mother, father, sisters, and brothers. The conversation ranged widely before getting down to solving the problem.

The steps of the reconciliation were as follows:

Step one: preliminary agreement to agree (optional but assumed when one of the disputing parties initiates a meeting): Ansaf greeted the family and

asked if they were angry with us. “No, of course not,” they replied. “We don’t want hard feelings with anyone.” They were acknowledging that our coming was a “courageous” act—a swallowing of our pride in effect. Ansaf explained that we had come because “Madame” (pointing at me) “asks every day where N. is” (not literally true but a way to make me the neutral witness). “She worries about N., who is a good girl and works hard in our school”—again Ansaf assigning thoughts to me to show broader backing.

Step two: extreme positions are taken. Ansaf said, “I must tell you as an aunt [she uses the term for mother’s sister who is one who speaks with love but also frankly, rather than a father’s sister who speaks sternly and with authority] that what N. did was wrong. We gave her a good price for the clothes and she only wanted to pay a fraction of the money. The money is not for us; it’s for the poor, so what she did was shameful.” The father replied, “Well we thought the price was too high.”

Step three: reasons are given for the inappropriate behavior. The father said, “The truth is that my wife was in the hospital because of her sadness over the suicide of her sister’s son [we knew the case, so we knew he was telling the truth] just before N. brought the clothes home and so we were short of money. We know where the money goes and would never deprive the poor.”

Step four: a generous offer. Ansaf responded, “We brought another dress and a pair of shoes for N. Madame here wants to give her the dress and you can pay anything you want for the shoes.”

Step five: a compromise is accepted. N.’s father, speaking to his older daughter, said, “Go get a pound for the shoes.” Ansaf answered, “Oh no, that’s too much,” meaning he was too generous, since the crucial issue was that the family’s generosity has been questioned. She added, “Give us 75 pt; it is enough,” and they did.

Step six: normalizing the relationship. The sides complimented one another. The father noted that N. enjoyed the classes. She was sick when she was young and missed out on enrolling in the government school. They were pleased she had a chance to attend the center’s classes, since now she was too old for the public schools. We spoke of how well-behaved she was and how clever at her studies. They made coffee and we drank it together and then left with their promise that N. would never be absent from school again.

The goal of the visit was accomplished by removing a festering problem that might have created problems between Christians and Muslims. While it seemed small, issues like these had the potential to escalate into much larger conflicts drawing in supporters from both sides and resulting in bloodshed and long-term animosities.

While this was the basic pattern for settling disputes, each case differed in detail with the recognized steps modified or elaborated. The disputing parties

might, for example, bring in representatives to make inquiries about the readiness of their opponents to resolve the problem. In this way, they could avoid the personal affront of being rejected during step one. Ansaf in this case recast me as a “neutral” mediator who “couldn’t be refused” and kept drawing me into the negotiations to lend weight to them. In successful mediations, a neutral person often became the guarantor of the agreement, and in this case, Ansaf was setting me up as that person.

The effectiveness of negotiations hinged on certain well-established values: loyalty to group, defense of reputation (there was always a valid excuse that erased bad behavior), and belief in the ideal of peaceful relations among neighbors and communities. Another valued ideal was generosity. The person who took the first step in restoring peace was recognized as committing a generous act. And although conflicts were usually resolved by meeting in or near the middle, both parties were expected to show generosity, or the one who held out for more concessions, in effect, lost because he or she had not been generous in conceding points.

Even if negotiations broke down and people behaved in ways contradictory to these norms—to show the depth of their feeling about the point of conflict—they and their audiences knew what they were doing, and while criticizing them for violating norms, their opponents could also feel sympathy with their pain. It was similar to when women tore off their head scarves and went bareheaded while lamenting a dead relative; people did not castigate them for immodesty but rather sympathized with the depth of their feeling over the death of loved ones.

This pattern for dispute settlement has elements that extend far beyond the Bulaq community. President Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem was a good example. His going to Israel and the Israelis’ receiving him seemed to Sadat like a preliminary agreement to make peace (step one). The trip, which was unpopular in Egypt, was a generous concession on Sadat’s part, and he expected it to be returned with an equally generous offer from the Israelis. When that did not happen (Israelis negotiate like Westerners in bit by bit concessions), Sadat went home empty-handed and was later assassinated—many say because of that trip.

Resolving Family Disputes

Besides the obvious importance of mediating disputes between Christians and Muslims, it was also important to resolve disputes within and among Christian families. People derived their social identity and physical and emotional support from families, so being estranged from family for any reason would make it difficult to live even the most basic of normal adult lives.

Ansaf was frequently asked to resolve disputes among Christian families. As was true for any kind of community dispute, quarrels among families could threaten the peace of entire neighborhoods.

One day, Ansaf was called to the parental home of a Christian girl, S., still in her teens. She had left her husband because, among other reasons, she hated the sexual requirements of marriage. When we arrived at the house, however, we found her problems extended beyond the sexual ones.

Before marriage, her mother had not told her about the sexual ramifications of marriage, fearing they might dissuade her from accepting the husband they had arranged for her. S. dreamed of marriage as a time to acquire new furnishings and clothes and, with her husband, to have her own room in the household of her parents-in-law. Although her hopes came through in a modest way, other aspects of her situation were an unpleasant surprise. The household she entered consisted of the parents-in-law and several of her husband's brothers, one of whom had tried to have sex with her when the rest were out. The mother-in-law in particular had been looking forward to having a young person take over the clothes washing, cleaning, and food preparation in the household, and S. quickly found she was working from dawn to dusk and then at night submitting to her husband's sexual demands, which disgusted her.

One day when S. was chopping vegetables, her husband came home and demanded his "rights," and she retaliated by threatening him with the knife she was holding. When he began hitting her, she fled the house and returned to her parents' home. The parents were not welcoming and immediately tried to persuade her to return. Being Christians, divorce was out of the question unless S. or her husband converted to Islam, which was not an option as far as either of their families were concerned, so the only recourse was reconciliation and return to married life. As her parents repeated over and over again, she would have no future if she didn't return to her husband. In addition, her family would acquire a reputation for having daughters who were not tractable marriage partners.

Ansaf listened to the girl's side of the story, and I expected her to counsel S.'s parents not to make her go back to the terrible conditions she described. Instead, Ansaf explained gently to S. that she would never have children or a home of her own if she didn't go back. On a conciliatory note, Ansaf agreed to talk to the family and see what she could do to improve conditions for her.

A few days later, we visited the parents-in-law and observed in the cramped apartment that conditions were much as the girl had described them. Again, we listened to complaints—this time about the disaster of a daughter-in-law they had acquired who was disobedient and lazy and wouldn't sleep with her husband. And worst of all, the girl had tried to kill her husband with the kitchen knife. Ansaf agreed that all this was terrible but then began to speak quietly,

saying she could see they were good people and wanted their daughter-in-law back. She described how the girl was still young and had always been in the home of her mother where she knew little of the outside world (implying her purity and innocence). They should see that what the girl needed was someone to teach her what her duties were and not to overburden her with work. If they treated her like a true daughter, they could win her loyalty and she would become a good wife and later mother. They eventually agreed, and Ansaf said she would tell S.'s family that they were ready for reconciliation.

Both families agreed on a mediator who worked out an agreement between them and suggested a substantial gift from the husband to S. But when we went to S. again, she was still hesitant until Ansaf promised to go with her when she returned to her husband and to make frequent visits to S. in her home so her parents-in-law would know "someone was watching out for her." During the visit when S. returned to her husband, Ansaf reiterated with some exaggeration what each side had agreed on. S. would be a good wife and daughter-in-law, and her mother-in-law would share the work load.

This case roughly follows the steps of reconciliation described earlier, with Ansaf acting as the main mediator and later guarantor of the agreement. We visited once a month after the two sides agreed, and each time Ansaf asked how things were going and whether each side was keeping their side of the bargain. She would exhort S. about the duties of being a good wife and the mother-in-law about showing patience. S. looked happier and her mother-in-law praised her behavior. About a year later, S. had a baby and her pleased mother-in-law took on a larger share of the work. By that time, two of the brothers had left the home and the work had become easier. Ansaf felt the issue was resolved.

A point that becomes important in a later chapter of this book is that S.'s act of defiance managed to alienate everyone—her parents, her parents-in-law, her neighbors, and her husband. While her parents felt forced to take her in to guarantee her "purity," they regaled her with dire stories of women who didn't perform their wifely duties. While she was home, they refused to give her a change of clothing, so she would know the stay was temporary. Even the sympathetic Ansaf muttered about what a silly girl she was for causing herself all these problems when, in the end, she would have to return to her husband anyway. A case in a later chapter shows another option S. might have chosen that would have elicited a more sympathetic response from those concerned.

Ansaf viewed her role in mediating family disputes as her Christian duty and only secondarily as required by her job in the center. Her mediation efforts carried a weight that few other women in Bulaq commanded, mainly because of her known neutrality as an outsider to Bulaq, her higher class status, and because she had the moral authority of the Episcopal Church behind her.

A Muslim Case

In this third case, Ansaf took the somewhat unusual initiative to resolve a problem and eventually a conflict within a Muslim family.

During her visits in Bulaq, Ansaf heard about a young Muslim girl who had been terribly disfigured when a kerosene cooking stove exploded in her face. She went to visit the family who invited her in, and in the course of their conversation, the family told the story. “Where is she?” asked Ansaf. They answered that she was ashamed of her appearance and stayed in the bedroom when people visited. Eventually Ansaf coaxed her out and saw that indeed the girl was badly disfigured. She asked the parents if they would mind if she looked for a husband for the girl, and although they were skeptical of Ansaf finding one, the parents agreed.

Ansaf had in mind a blind imam from a poor family who would have difficulty putting together much of a dowry to marry. Although his family was reluctant at first to accept the “disfigured bride,” they finally agreed, since the dowry would be waived altogether. It seemed the perfect match. They married and eventually had three sons.

One day, Ansaf was called to the house of the woman’s family because the imam, with pressure from his family, had sent his wife back to her home. We listened to the woman’s side of the story and then went to see the imam at the home of his relatives. They explained that they were ashamed having this woman in the family and wanted to find a better wife for him. Ansaf asked the imam if his wife had not been good to him; had she not taken care of his needs and borne him three sons? The imam agreed that she had. Ansaf asked if her disfigurement had in any way affected their relationship, and he said it had not and eventually he agreed to take her back. Finally, Ansaf went to the family and said it would be *haram* (a sin) to throw out this woman who had done everything she could to be a good wife.

This case shows Ansaf’s natural sympathies for people with problems she had the capacity to solve and her ability to operate effectively in a variety of contexts. It was unlikely she told the church authorities about this case or, if she had, whether they would have condoned her mediation efforts on behalf of Muslims. It was certainly not a role they envisioned for her as the center’s social worker, making “parish-like visits.” I remember the excitement she felt in thinking up ways to “make people happy,” as she would say. She frequently expressed her belief that everyone should marry, have children, and enjoy a good family life, and if she could help those missing these opportunities, she would try her best.

Summary

This chapter describes the way disputes were resolved in Bulaq in a pattern of reconciliation that appears well-known in Egyptian society. Even Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in 1977 to reconcile with Israeli leaders shows traces of the same pattern. The essential basis for reconciliation requires an initial "agreement to agree" (a broad vision) between the disputing parties, a period of venting the issues, generous offers at reconciliation from both sides to move the process along, acceptance of a compromise, and finally agreement and some act that symbolizes the restoration of normalcy. In difficult cases, a mediator acceptable to both sides may outline the terms of agreement and later guarantee its implementation.

The chapter also gives examples of how this pattern worked in resolving a dispute between Muslims and Christians, among Christian families, and finally in an unusual case of two Muslim families.

CHAPTER 9

Social Controls on Marriage

At all levels of the community, nothing alarmed Christians more than the thought of Christians converting to Islam. The most common way for this to happen was through Christian women marrying Muslim men by “falling in love” rather than through the orderly process of parentally arranged marriages. This chapter looks first at the different views of cross-sect marriage that caused Christians so much concern about their children’s marriages. It then describes the process of arranging marriages and people’s expectations about the “natural” consequences of certain types of marriage for the stability of family and community life.

Different Views on Cross-Sect Marriages

From the perspective of retaining members, Christianity was at a disadvantage compared with Islam. As mentioned earlier, Islamic codes were designed not just to retain members but to expand the Muslim community. The next chapter will look in more detail at how the law created boundaries between Muslims and Christians, while here we will look at the reasons for Christian concerns.

The first principle in shari’a that supported this goal was the one that allowed Muslim men to marry outside their faith, while Muslim women were prevented from doing so. This created a one-way movement of child bearers into the Muslim community where children legally followed their fathers’ religion:

In a taxi cab, a Muslim passenger was commenting on the correctness of the Bulaq Center’s policy to provide classes for both Christians and Muslims: “In our family, we believe it is unimportant whether a person is Muslim or Christian. In fact, two of my relatives married Christian women in order to follow the Prophet’s example of marriage to a Christian. You know, don’t you, that he married a Christian? We are all happy to have the Christian women in our family and don’t treat them any differently.”

This was not good news to Ansaf who was with me although she smiled affably. Later she grumbled, “They take our women but don’t let us take theirs!” She was fully aware that the families of the Christian women in question would have been unhappy about this arrangement if for no other reason than the difficulty they would face in marrying other children into Christian families.

A second principle encouraging expansion of the Islamic community was the ability of Muslims to have four wives. This practice kept more women married and producing Muslim children at a rate faster than Christians. Moderate Muslims believed the practice was only allowed when the wives were treated equally, which in the real world, was difficult to achieve. Most men in Bulaq could not afford to have more than one wife, so few if any cases existed.

Christian personal-status laws had other “disadvantages” in terms of community strengthening: Christians could only marry one wife, and divorce was difficult if not impossible.¹ Consequently, separated and widowed women and incompatible and infertile couples did not achieve the child-bearing ratios that would have been possible under the more flexible arrangements of Islamic laws.

Unlike Muslims who centuries ago collected injunctions from the Koran and used examples from the life of the Prophet, Christian legal principles were derived from the weaker terms of biblical storytelling—that is, of what was good or bad behavior. Moreover, varying interpretations among the denominations of Christianity meant they were unable to speak as one voice on many issues including marriage. The Coptic Church insisted that a bride and groom be Coptic Orthodox before they could be married in a Coptic Church, while other Christian denominations agreed to marry a couple as long as both were Christian. The insistence of the Copts on both belonging to the church forced one of the pair to convert if they were from different denominations or to find a denomination that would agree to marry them. The default when two denominations were involved was to marry under Islamic law. All these complications made Christian parents eager to ensure that their children marry the right person, certainly not a Muslim and preferably someone from their own denomination.

Regulating Contact between Unmarried Young People

Most Christians in Bulaq were illiterate and not well versed either in the tenets and sacraments of the Church or in the basic traditions of their community. Norms, with regard to contact between the sexes and to marriage, however, were well known in Egyptian society. These norms regulated the contact of unmarried males and females—usually by separating them or having them meet only under controlled conditions. These norms were supposed to effectively reduce conflicts that would otherwise have arisen from unregulated access to young

females. It probably should not have been a surprise in the lawless period after the Uprising of 2011, when sectarian conflicts were escalating, that violence often erupted after rumors circulated about violations of conduct relating to males and females of Christian and Muslim communities. While many turned out to be exaggerations and distortions of truth, nonetheless the rumors were instant flashpoints in the two communities. In the densely populated quarters of Cairo, it was difficult to avoid contact between the sexes—no matter how fleeting—or to have the intent of the interaction misconstrued. Even an indirect glance or verbal harassment could be construed as sexual provocation.

For the most part, limiting Christian defections to the Muslim community by way of marriage could be accomplished simply by enforcing social norms concerned with the separation of the sexes. Some Christians, however, believed they had to be especially vigilant because some Muslims were actively bent on marrying Christian women. Whether this was of the magnitude Christians described was not possible to know, but as noted earlier, personal-status law allowed Muslim men to marry Christian women but not Christian men to marry Muslim women. Consequently, there was no comparable way, even if they had wanted to do so, for Christians to bring Muslims into their community. If Christian women married Muslims and maintained their faith, their children by law still followed the religion of their fathers and became Muslims.

Marriage Controls

Separating the Sexes

The best way for Christians to avoid these problems was to control the marriage process itself. Obviously for people in Bulaq, it would be impossible to implement the more extreme forms of control practiced among the affluent classes. There, parents could apply external controls on the behavior of adolescent girls by keeping them home much of the time and only allowing them out in modest clothing, with special transport, trusted chaperones, and to selected destinations.²

In Bulaq, although controls like these might be perceived as ideal, the lack of resources made them impossible to implement. But the importance of family reputation meant maintaining positive public images, signifying in large part that women's behavior was controlled. In theory, the duties of girls and women were supposed to keep them home much of the time, and they only went out when it was essential to do so. To maintain the image, women often went to great lengths to make sure the reason for moving about in public was apparent. A school girl, for example, would carry a stack of school books or a woman a marketing bag or a jug to transport water from the public faucet. If possible, they were accompanied by a "protector"—a husband or adult son,

another woman, a young child, or a school mate. They hurried along with cast-down eyes and stayed within a radius that was legitimate given the nature of their mission. Because parents feared that even one small lapse, whether real or perceived, might hurt the family's image, significant numbers of Christians kept daughters from attending school at all or pulled them out at adolescence to prevent them from attracting the attention of Muslim suitors.

Restrictions were tightest when young women neared marriageable age. Unless an errand was nearby, someone would usually accompany her. If the girl's mother went to visit a friend, she often left her daughter behind "so as not to advertise her daughter's availability." Only after girls were engaged were they allowed to see and talk with a man—their fiancé—at close range and then usually with an escort or chaperone nearby. The engagement period was still a vulnerable time, since although a formal commitment existed between the two, the legal attachment could still be dissolved.³ Parents had to keep a close eye on the girl to make sure that if marriage plans fell through, her reputation still allowed her to find another suitor.

Being a "Nice Girl"

A potentially more secure form of control, if it worked, was to instill "nice-girl" norms in a girl. These were behaviors approved by society as making someone a good, moral person.⁴ Internalized controls had several advantages. They made it possible to relax external controls in situations where girls could be relied on to monitor themselves; the girls felt less restricted; the controls covered a wider range of behaviors, and they extended over a lifetime as well as costing far less to enforce than external controls.⁵ The crowded conditions of Bulaq required all girls to develop some degree of self-control if they were to maintain respect. A glance in the wrong direction, the momentary slip of a veil, too form revealing a cover, too easy a demeanor, immediately started tongues wagging in Bulaq. The girls to whom these norms were most important were the few who attended university and had to commute daily to classes. They learned to cast down their eyes, wear modest clothes,⁶ and make it clear they were on their way to the university. They shared the same objective as their parents of wanting to marry well and preserve family honor. Interestingly, their task was easier in Bulaq because the public was observably respectful of women who achieved academic success enough to be admitted to university. They were given more scope to move in public alone, perhaps because (as some older women told me), university students "learn to be rational in their thinking and understand the implications of their actions." In Bulaq, it was essential to frame behavior so her intent was obvious—namely, showing where she was going and what she would be doing there.

Because public perception counted most, parents tried to combine external and internal controls, accompanying their daughters when possible but also instilling “nice-girl” concepts that encouraged their own self-control. Even accompanied and modestly attired, a young woman drew attention if her garments were too provocative or her actions and speech too immodest.

Clitoridectomy

One of the harshest forms of control over women was clitoridectomy. This practice was widespread in Egypt in the 1970s despite public efforts by the government to ban it.⁷ It existed in all classes, and probably more than 90 percent⁸ of Egyptian women had had the operation.⁹ In Bulaq, the practice among both Christians and Muslims was virtually universal. Clitoridectomy was considered by parents to be a highly successful means of controlling the sexual urges of women. When I said Europeans and Americans didn’t do it, the response was that they came from “cold” (blooded) countries where it wasn’t necessary. Islam strongly condemned the practice, but no one enforced the ban. I knew of no official ban by the Christian Church, but some organizations supported by upper-class Christian women tried to eliminate the practice with little success. Local Christians and Muslims frequently justified the practice by saying it was required by their religion, and in Bulaq, a common perception was that if the practice were not carried out, women would grow genitalia like a man and therefore be unmarriageable. Mothers were just as eager to have their girls circumcised as were fathers.

The Bulaq Center Role

With controls so prevalent in the wider society, the church and the Bulaq Center again only had to reinforce existing norms. In sewing and literacy classes, the Christian teachers exhorted young women informally to behave properly and obey their parents, and they kept a strict eye on the behavior of their young charges. Religious meetings conveyed similar messages, and since they brought together mothers seeking brides from good families for their sons with mothers of eligible young women, it was important for both sides to appear to have impeccable family images with public statements about their own worthiness. Marriage-age women rarely attended the meetings for the same reason noted earlier—that is, mothers didn’t want it to appear that they were advertising their daughters.

Orderly Access to Marriageable Women

With all the controls on young women, there needed to be a process for eligible Christian men to access potential partners yet with safeguards against Muslim

men having similar access. “Falling in love” was considered an immoral way to meet unless dignified by quickly involving parents in the process.

In Bulaq, marriage should be arranged through a number of mediators. The normal procedure was for a man to decide he was ready for marriage, usually because he had amassed sufficient sums and had a solid income. If he had no one in mind, he would send out his mother with a list of criteria for his ideal bride. When I asked about the criteria, the answer was usually that the candidate should be “beautiful and kind.” Others told me that in Upper Egypt there were three criteria:

When the potential mother-in-law visited the home of the candidate, the young woman must bring her an egg that she had hard-boiled and removed the shell from to show she could accomplish this task without nicking the egg. As she passed by, the visiting mother would yank at her long braid to make sure it was her own hair. Finally as the visitor left, she would pinch her buttocks to ensure she was pleasingly plump and had not added padding.¹⁰

Whether true or not, these details suggest the features mothers looked for in a bride: knowing how to cook and having various physically pleasing characteristics.

The man’s mother might start her quest by inquiring about neighbors with young daughters who might be available, and almost certainly, she would start attending the religious meetings more regularly where the field of Christian candidates was larger. She had probably been thinking about the options for some time and might even have a list of candidates she had noticed in wedding festivities or at other “occasions.” Because of her wide circle of acquaintances, Ansaf was often approached about eligible women and sometimes made preliminary inquiries to see if girls’ parents were interested. This avoided the potential embarrassment of being refused if the mother inquired herself.

Once the mother identified a potential bride, there might be a discrete meeting of the two candidates. The most common format was for the mother and son to visit the young woman’s home. When the girl’s mother and visitors were settled and had exchanged pleasantries, the candidate would appear with a tea tray for the guests. She might then withdraw or, in some cases, join the group. When she came to replenish the cups or to remove the dirty dishes, the young man could signal his approval by placing a LE 10 note¹¹ on the tray. Sometimes there were more visits before he gave his final approval for the marriage. If he decided to reject the woman, he might simply let time elapse until her family figured out she had been refused. Then they could send a face-saving message such as “Our daughter has decided to continue her studies and is not available.”

The following particularly difficult case shows some of the problems that could arise in the course of the search:

An elderly widow, Um F., from one of the center's families, searched at length for a bride for her "poorly qualified" son. He earned his income from the perilous job of peddling vegetables and was known in the community to have a drug habit. Family after family of daughters refused the widow's inquiries, so Um F. broadened her search. She started coming regularly to the religious meetings and stayed afterward to discuss her problem with Ansaf. On Ansaf's advice, she decided to consider girls with obvious defects who might consider a bridegroom with less-than-ideal credentials. Um F. asked among the Christian women at the service and finally was told about a one-eyed candidate whose family rarely went to meetings and therefore might not know about the son's disadvantages. The parents agreed to meet Um F., but the meeting was not successful because either they made inquiries about the son or Um F. was not impressed with the girl. Reasons for not agreeing to a marriage were often vague so as not to embarrass either family.

One day when Um F. was in a meeting, she was captivated by the shy, dimpled plump H. H.'s husband had converted to Islam and divorced her several months before she bore his son. Um F. appreciated the fact that she was a proven child bearer and felt her defect of being a divorced woman was tolerable, since she may have been blameless in the marriage. Negotiations began in earnest for her hand. Although H. wanted to marry again and wanted to cease the water-carrying work that supported herself and her son, her own mother cautioned that this man might not improve her situation. The mother continued to make excuses to Um F., saying a suitor from the village was expected and that they must see him first. Um F. offered clothes to H., furnishings for an apartment, and numerous other inducements for her to accept the marriage. Meanwhile, H.'s divorce papers continued to be "held up," and eventually Um F. recognized that it wasn't going to work.

Feeling sorry for Um F., Ansaf suggested one day that she seek out Um R. who had a stepdaughter the family feared might be falling in love with a Muslim. Everyone, including Ansaf, was eager to see her married quickly to a Christian. Since Um F. was still in negotiation with H.'s family, she first declined, feeling it would be shameful to negotiate on more than one front at a time. But being anxious about finding someone, she finally agreed to sound out this new possibility before she had a definitive answer about H. The family of the new girl refused even to consider the son, so Ansaf came up with another candidate. In this case, the young woman's younger sister had already married. This fact was unusual, since families normally try to marry children in birth order, with the exception that sometimes boys wait to help their sisters marry first. Um F. of course wondered why the older sister hadn't married before the younger one and assumed there must be a problem of some sort. Because the family didn't attend center activities, Ansaf didn't know the details, but she also felt instinctively

that something was wrong. After discrete inquiries, she discovered that after the younger sister had married “for love,” a brother converted to Islam to marry a Muslim girl, and then “no Christian wanted to marry into the family.” The older girl seemed interested at first in Um F’s son but eventually refused him.

In the end, Um F’s son solved his own problem by flirting with one of the Christian teachers in the handicraft classes who, to everyone’s surprise, agreed to marry this man who was below her social level.

Once both sides agreed to a match, negotiations about the terms of the contract—dowries, furnishings, and apartments—shifted to the men of the families.¹²

Cross-Sect Marriages

The impenetrability of this Christian network effectively ensured that most Muslims would have difficulty marrying Christian girls. In cases where it happened, it invariably involved the “irrational” factor of falling in love. If the parents of the girl were unable to prevent the marriage, then for the rest of her life, she would live with the fact of the huge burden she had placed on her parents and siblings and even on further generations. In the cases I knew, the parents refused ever to see their daughters again.

This case shows how careful Christians are to avoid slip-ups. A mother reported the following:

One day, I found my daughter peeking out the window at a Muslim boy who appeared to be strolling up and down trying to attract her attention. I asked S. if she loved the boy, and she said she was attracted to him when she saw him helping an old man with a heavy bundle. One day, he sent her a note through a friend, and she replied by throwing a note from her balcony. Otherwise, they only saw one another from a distance. I told her that if a boy and a girl were even seen walking together, they would have to marry, since no one else would marry her after that. She realized I was right and that there was no way she could marry the Muslim boy, so she stopped trying to attract his attention. One day when she was walking with her brother, the Muslim boy approached and tried to start a conversation. But my son, who is a good boy, spoke very abruptly with him asking what he wanted. After that, he didn’t bother her anymore. Eventually S. met a Christian man who came to the door with a letter for my son. He liked her proud aloofness and asked his mother to make inquiries about her.

When it became a strong possibility that a Christian girl would marry a Muslim, community members joined together to avert the “catastrophe.”

We stopped by Um R.'s house to bring her some handwork to do. She was a widow in her thirties. Um R. was talking about her husband: "He was a good man and always treated me well. When he died, I offered to take care of his five children by his first wife along with mine, but his brothers refused. The children live alone now and are pretty well grown up, but still I could have been a good mother to them. The oldest girl is 20, and I am very concerned about her. She lives with her brother in a building where all the other flats are occupied by Muslims. I think the neighbor upstairs wants her for his son, since he gave the children a television set and is always visiting them." Ansaf broke in, "Isn't there someone from your relatives who could marry her quickly?" "No not really. If you know of anyone let us know. We are worried about her. She is beautiful, even more than this one," pointing to a daughter standing with her. "All right," said Ansaf, "we'll see what we can do," and turning to me, suggested we go see Um F. who hadn't yet found someone for her son. I suggested that he wasn't a very good candidate, but she replied, "Never mind, he's looking for a wife."

Few cross-sect marriages ever occurred in Bulaq because first marriages were so carefully controlled by parents. But enough of them occurred to make parents fearful they might happen to their children and related stories about the horrors that occurred as a result of these marriages:

There once was a priest and his wife in our village in Upper Egypt who had three daughters and a son. They were well-to-do landowning families. The two oldest girls were very proud of their fine origins and refused all the young men who came asking for them. None was considered good enough. The younger daughter went to the university and there met the son of an important Muslim politician. She converted to Islam and they ran away and married and went to another Arab country to live. Her father and mother never would see her again. Soon after, the two older sisters took the first men they could find and married them, although they were less suitable than others who had come looking before. They knew they had no choice after their sister's conversion. The father was so shamed by her marriage that he left Upper Egypt and went to live anonymously in Cairo where he died shortly thereafter. The announcement of his death in the newspaper listed the names of family members and at the end noted a daughter, without giving her name, who lived in Saudi Arabia.

When I asked why other innocent members of the family were so affected by the sister's marriage, people confirmed the common understanding that "families of the men who married the other sisters would not like it that their grandchildren would have Muslim cousins."

Another danger of cross-sect marriage was the legal prohibition against inheritance crossing religious boundaries. Unless both husband and wife were of the same religion, inheritance was blocked and reverted to family members

of the same religion. This, of course, applied mainly to Christian women who kept their religion when they married Muslim husbands. The only way to avoid the problem was for them to convert, but many were ignorant of this requirement and out of conviction remained Christian. Their children, of course, were Muslim like their fathers:¹³

Um N. was telling us the story of the shopkeeper for whom she did piecework. He was a Muslim who married a rich Christian woman. They had no children, so they adopted¹⁴ two to inherit the man's money. The husband remained Muslim even though his wife gave him a Bible to read and tried to get him to convert. By law, of course, the children took the religious affiliation of the father. Eventually the wife died, and her money was supposed to be distributed among her sisters and brothers, but the Muslim husband paid a bribe to a sheikh to say she had converted to Islam, so he and the children could take the money.¹⁵

Securing Stable Marriages

The examples so far have mostly described controls on women before marriage. But serious disruptions could occur when marriages were unstable. Christians had at least three ways to encourage marriage stability: relative marriage, sibling marriage exchanges, and if all else failed, strict laws against divorce.

Relative Marriage

In rural Egypt, relative marriage was considered the safest form of marriage to ensure stability. It was said to be the marriage that best suited the mutual interests of all those involved. Marriage with “strangers” required considerable research to know about the potential spouse’s background and character, while in relative marriage, everything that needed to be known was known. All else being equal, parents wanted their daughters to marry someone of the same or higher status (men could marry down), so they would continue in the lifestyle they were accustomed to. Marrying a relative also solved the problem of finding someone of the right status. Education somewhat confused this issue when a poor boy with good prospects because of advanced degrees wanted to marry a girl of a better family. Her parents might consider his future potential if the girl was willing to marry him.

For mothers-in-law, kin marriages were supposed to ensure tractable daughters-in-law, and for daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law who were aunts and already known to them thus offering them a comforting environment. For men, kin marriages were supposed to ensure peace among the women of the family, since as family members, they were supposed to share common interests. If conflicts occurred, relatives of both sides would exert pressure on the couple to resolve their differences.

The ideal form was for paternal cousins to marry—fathers' brothers' children (FaBrCh) or secondarily mother's sisters' children (MoSiCh) and less likely mother's brother's children (MoBrCh).¹⁶ Preferred marriages were said to differ for men and women. Men preferred father's side marriages in order to consolidate family property and keep family reputation under the undivided authority and loyalty of the paternal relatives. Women preferred mother's side marriages, where relatives were supposed to be warm and supportive and would not be so demanding about behavioral standards, since they had little personal stake in the paternal family name. Having a MoSi for a mother-in-law was ideal for a young woman because this aunt was the closest one emotionally—in effect, a substitute for her mother. This aunt would support her side in conflicts because of her loyalty to the girl's mother and thus to the girl herself. She would also want their maternal branch to look good in the eyes of the husband's family, so she would help her niece play down tensions in front of the husband's relatives. Since she had presumably chosen the bride, she would also want her to seem a good choice.

Among center members, amazingly, there were seven marriages where these two ideal forms were combined: the bride's mother-in-law was a maternal aunt and the father-in-law a paternal uncle. In reporting their marriages, these women expressed the relationship to their husbands as "He is my MoSiSo and I am his FaBrDa" instead of in the three other variant ways possible. This was to show that their marriages were ideal from the perspective of both spouses.

Whether an individual married while living in a rural area before coming to Bulaq or as a resident of Bulaq had an important bearing on which of the ideal forms of marriage—for a male or a female—they sought. In rural areas where property and family name had more significance, the majority of relative marriages took place among paternal relatives. Of the center's members coming from the village (121 cases),¹⁷ 66 percent (80) married a relative, and of these, 84 percent (67) married a paternal relative. Paternal-side marriages were so strongly preferred in rural areas that parents felt they had to ask the parents of a paternal cousin for permission if they wanted to marry their daughters to someone else. One of the best excuses for refusing a marriage proposal in Bulaq was to say vaguely that there was a paternal cousin in the village who had first rights.

In urban areas, where family name was not well known and there was little significant property to pass on, there were fewer compelling reasons to marry paternal relatives. Of the center's members originating in urban areas (58 cases), only 36 percent (21) contracted marriages with relatives. Of those who married relatives, not as high a proportion married fathers' relatives (57 percent, or 12 cases) compared to the 84 percent of those coming from rural origins.

The way women answered the questions about their husbands revealed better than the actual numbers what people felt about various kinds of marriage:

The following are comments by women married in rural areas before coming to Bulaq: "I married my FaBrSo—what do you expect? I am from the village." A variation might be "FaBrSo of course; I am from Upper Egypt. We all marry like that there." One said, "Well, I married my MoSiSo, but it was only because my FaBrSo was too young for me." And another, "My husband was not related to me *because* I was his second wife." Among the Bulaq members, none of the second wives (usually after the death of the first)¹⁸ were related to their husbands. There was an onus on being a second wife in these cases because men often had to take a woman with a defect, since she would be taking on the burden of his children.

The following are comments by women raised in Cairo: "I married a relative of my father, but it was a man I had grown up with and he called me *bint khala* [MoSiDa]." "I married my FaBrSo instead of my MoSiSo because he came from the village and said he wanted to marry me, and my family felt he had the first right to ask for me." In both these cases, the implication was that the speaker should ideally have married her MoSiSo. In one case, she was even called MoSiDa by her FaBrSo to put a good spin on the relationship, and in the second case, the choice was dictated by village rather than city norms.

Part of the reason that the majority of urban marriages were not between relatives was that kin were fewer and more scattered, and the advantage of having nearby family in the vicinity was lost. Related families often no longer knew each other well if some lived in the city and some remained in the countryside. And when relative marriages did occur, mother's side marriages were becoming more popular in urban areas. Whether it would become the dominant form of urban marriage for the lower classes was hard to know. Of the six cases of younger women who had just married or were about to marry relatives (excluding older women's marriages), five were marrying a MoSiSo and one was supposed to marry a FaBrSo. The explanation for the last case was that the girl was caught in a brothel by the police, and her FaBr offered his son for the sake of the family's reputation. Later, the young man broke the engagement despite entreaties to save the family name.

The advantages of mother's side marriages for poor urban dwellers were several. First, they reinforced the already close emotional ties between women kin that were important in an urban environment filled with strangers. Second, women could move more freely in the households of female relatives during weekdays when only women were at home. Third, these marriages ensured that family celebrations and holidays would be spent with emotionally close, rather than emotionally more remote, husband's kin. Finally, these marriages

significantly increased the service exchanges between relatives during family events. In the absence of many material resources in Bulaq, service exchanges among women became important assets. Men also felt better about having their women associate with female relatives than being exposed to men in stranger families or even the husband's own brothers in a paternal-cousin marriage (see the case of S. where the brother sought sex with her).

For Christians, an additional advantage of relative marriages was that they solidified religious ties, since family members would be not only Christians but Christians of the same denomination.

*Sibling Marriage Exchanges*¹⁹

One reason there were not more relative marriages was that it was often difficult to find a related bride or groom of an appropriate age, especially in urban areas where fewer family members lived nearby. It was not unusual for women to say they had married a FaBrSo (*ibn 'am*) when in fact the men were really FaFaBrSoSo or some such variation on the paternal side. Others claimed to have married an *ibn 'am* when in fact the man was not a relative. "Well," they would say when asked to explain, "He was the son of my father's best friend whom I've called uncle all my life, so he is like a FaBrSo to me." Still calling him *ibn 'am* put the spin of the ideal on the relationship and suggested that if the best candidate were not available, a person could make it sound ideal.

When appropriate candidates couldn't be found for these ideal forms of marriage, there was another arrangement that was supposed to accomplish some of the same results: closer family ties, mutuality of interests, and theoretically, more stable and happy marriages. This was marriage contracted between two sets of siblings. A man and a woman from unrelated families might become engaged, and through them, their siblings might meet and become interested in one another. Often it was two Christian families who had known each other for a long time and wanted to cement their friendship by marrying two sets of their children.

There were two kinds of sibling marriages, each with different implications. In one, two sisters from one family married two brothers of another family, and in the second, a brother and a sister from one family married a brother and a sister from another. When two sisters marry two brothers, strong emotional ties presumably exist between the same-sex siblings that would likely reinforce their parental families rather than their marital ones. When families got together, the siblings would have each other if activities were sex-segregated in the homes of their mutual in-laws.

However, when a sister and brother from one family married a sister and brother from another, the major advantage was financial at the time of marriage, since the bride prices would equal out, and the wedding festivities could

be joint and therefore less expensive. At family gatherings after marriage, however, the females might not find it as congenial as when the marriages were of same-sex siblings, since the brides would be “alone” with “outsider” women in the homes of their parents-in-law, while their brothers were conveniently enjoying the company of their own parental families.

In both kinds of sibling marriage, people said the major disadvantage was that problems in the marriage of one couple were likely to spill over into the other couple’s marriage, since siblings and families would take the side of their own kin, right or wrong. I heard of a sad case where the estrangement of one couple meant family members forced the unwilling separation of the other couple.

Relative and sibling marriages were also common in the Muslim community. Christians, however, found them particularly compatible with their desire to keep marriages within their own community. These Egyptian marriages were all the more interesting because elsewhere in the Middle East—in Lebanon, for example—prohibitions against certain types of close-relative marriages were an important difference between Christians and Muslims.

Summary

A number of assumptions went into marriage making—about the emotional closeness of certain kinds of relationships and the distance in others, about who would be most likely to support the bride and groom, and what kinds of people were likely to succeed in marriage. Personality and physical attraction were, of course, part of the equation, but for parents, they were only one element that fed into deliberations about the kinds of marriages they wanted for their children. To keep control over the process of choosing spouses, parents tried to prevent their children—especially vulnerable females—from being swept up in “irrational love matches” that might occur inadvertently if couples met in public spaces. Christians were particularly fearful of their daughters attracting or being attracted by Muslim men if they escaped the controls imposed on their behavior.

This discussion of marriage highlights the fact that young people were an important family asset that could enhance or detract from long-term family interests. Most parents—even the poor ones—felt responsible for seeing their children well settled and happy in their marriages, even while being aware of the long-term advantages and disadvantages in certain choices. Children had the theoretical right to say yes or no to a candidate, but few refused a candidate strongly recommended by their parents, and most would not marry anyone disapproved of by their parents. Marriage affected other family members as much as the couple themselves.

Marriage choices in Bulaq, as this chapter shows, were based strongly on assumptions about the nature of relationships. People were so convinced of the “natural” strength of family ties that they tried to transfer this durability to their children’s marriage relations, despite any evidence to the contrary. These strong convictions shaped not only the kinds of marriages contracted but also a couple’s relations after marriage, as well as their relations with their families of origin.

The new point that comes out of this chapter is that paternal-relative marriage, which has been reported all over the Arab world as the preferred model, finds exceptions among the poor in an urban setting. In the absence of much property, women’s service exchanges become a much greater asset. As a consequence, among those poor who still marry kin, mothers’ children become the preferred, although not always attainable, spouses.

CHAPTER 10

Formal Boundaries between Christians and Muslims

Probably the most important of the implicit aims of the Bulaq Center was to maintain cordial relations between Muslims and Christians. Weaker in numbers and political power, Christians in Egypt had no choice but to get along with Muslims. But Christians were interested also in preserving the integrity of their community and preventing erosion of their numbers through conversion.

The distribution of Muslims and Christians in Bulaq in the 1970s precluded neatly divided communities where contacts could be held to a minimum and conflicts contained. This chapter looks at Christian expectations about boundaries brought with them from their rural experiences and then describes some institutional boundaries between the two communities, while the next chapter looks at boundaries as implemented at the personal level by Christians and Muslims.

Christian Expectations

An interesting question relating to boundaries is whether Christian migrants to Bulaq found residential patterns similar to those they knew in their villages or if it was a new experience to live in neighborhoods with strangers who were neither Christian nor kin. If their villages had been homogeneous, they might have been unprepared to cope with what had been a “far antagonist,” while if they came from mixed villages, they might already have ways of coping with Muslim neighbors.

According to the 1960 census,¹ only 2 percent of villages in Egypt were exclusively Christian, compared to 28 percent that were exclusively Muslim. The other 70 percent were mixed.² Bulaq Center Christians reported a variety of situations in the villages from which they emigrated. In some places,

Christians and Muslims lived in distinctly separate villages; in others they were segregated by quarter or street; and in yet others, there was more intermixing. The differences often related to the size and prominence of the communities and the availability of space when families needed to expand. Laws exist in Egypt that prevent the sale of agricultural land for residential use, and although often ignored in practice, these prohibitions tended to restrict areas where new homes could be built. So even in villages, finding a place to live was not easy. Another factor was the upheavals that resulted from land reform where land and homes in new areas of town opened up. What started out as distinct quarters in some villages might later lead to more mixed neighborhoods:

S., in her seventies, told me about her village. She said that when she was a girl, the majority of rich people living in the village were Christian and the poor mainly Muslim. They lived in separate streets in family groupings, which in her case, meant that all her close neighbors were Christians and many of them relatives. As a child, she was not allowed to play with Muslim children. The mayor of the town—a Christian—was always chosen from the landowning family with the most acreage. His main job was to collect taxes and deal with the Turkish governor. Things remained much the same during the British period, but after independence in 1952, things began changing rapidly. Educated Christians fled to the city to find jobs after they lost their land.³ Muslims bought their homes and land and eventually became the wealthy class. Currently, she said, the mayor was Muslim and the only Christians left were poor. The neighborhoods quickly became mixed as Muslims bought Christians' homes, and people found it hard to live in family groupings.

H., in his eighties, told a story with a different twist. His village was about half Christian and half Muslim when he was a boy, with some streets mainly for Muslims and some for Christians. His family lived in a street where all the neighbors were Muslim. That happened simply because his great-grandfather built his home there. He didn't know why his grandfather chose to live among Muslims, but he did know that his family wasn't happy about it. On the surface, the family had good relations with their neighbors, going to their weddings, funerals, and other events, even while privately being against them. H. remembered that once his father had told him to kiss the hand of the sheikh and he refused because his grandfather used to recite the proverb, "If your little finger is Muslim, cut off your whole arm." He didn't want even to touch a Muslim's hand.

All the while H. was growing up, the village had a Muslim mayor, even though there were well-to-do Christians in the village. After 1952, most of the richer Christians moved to the city. They were tired of being discriminated against by Muslim officials and couldn't see that things would get better, so they went where their educated status made it possible for them to earn a living. Afterward, the village became mainly Muslim.

According to Bulaq members who discussed the subject, family was the main reason for choosing places to live in the village and religious identity was simply an overlapping category. Newlyweds set up housekeeping either with or near their husbands' families. The common village practice of marrying children to their fathers' siblings solidified patrilineal residential patterns. About half the Bulaq Center Christians from villages, as noted, married according to this pattern.

Family enclaves in villages intensified interactions among coreligionists but didn't prevent contacts with Muslims. A certain amount of segregation may even have kept relations more cordial, since contact could be contained to formal and infrequent meetings without the irritation of everyday exposure.⁴ Moreover, segregation allowed both groups to relax within their own communities and behave as though they constituted the universe rather than the minority they were nationally. Village life seemed to have given Christians experience with Christian communal life and also, in some cases, interacting with Muslims but usually with controls over how often and under what conditions contacts would take place. These mixed experiences of Bulaq residents meant it was imperative for many of them to learn how to relate to Muslims who might be living next door.

Boundaries

Bailey writes that "on each side of a particular boundary there may be different sets of values and norms, different definitions of what ought to be and of what is, different ends of actions and consequently different means prescribed for reaching these ends."⁵ Perhaps the most enduring examples in the Bulaq case are the separate legal codes and rituals that pertain to the two communities.

Personal-Status Codes⁶

The people of Bulaq, as elsewhere in Egypt, were subject to the defining properties of legal systems. In Egypt, there were two kinds of legal code: civil law, which was administered to all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation, and personal-status laws, which addressed marriage, separation, divorce, custody, and inheritance based on the separate codes of the religious groups. In Egypt, individuals were required to belong to a particular religion to come under an appropriate set of laws. One reason these separate codes persisted was because Christian congregations raised strong objections whenever the Egyptian Parliament considered imposing a universal, usually Islamic, law on the country as a whole. Christians understood the importance of personal-status laws for the survival of their community.

Over the years, the boundaries between the separate sets of personal-status laws eroded somewhat. Before 1955, separate judicial systems administered

the personal-status codes of the different denominations under the Majlis al-Milli (council of the millet). But after 1955, separate courts were abolished and personal-status law was turned over to a civil court to administer.⁷ In theory, these courts were to apply the rules of the separate religious communities in a more standardized way while still preserving their differences. In fact, although this aim was generally accomplished, the main change was that the administration of Christian law that had formerly been exclusively in the hands of Christian jurists was turned over to “civil” judges regardless of their religious affiliation—often Muslim. The original requirement that Christian judges be present in Christian cases was soon dropped in practice.⁸ The problem was that Muslim judges were not usually knowledgeable about Christian personal-status law.

Christians believed that when a doubt existed over which code of religious law to apply, the presence of a Muslim judge assured a bias in favor of Islamic law. Such a case occurred in the spring of 1978, raising fears among Christians that new precedents might be established. Newspaper headlines announced “Christian May Marry Four Wives.” The paper reported a judge’s ruling in the case of a Christian man who was accused by his first wife of contracting a second bigamous marriage. The first wife asked that the second marriage be repealed:

The reason that Mrs. Beshara gave for repealing the marriage contract was that the Christian religion entitles a man to one wife only and does not allow polygamy.

The court of First Instance ruled that the second marriage contract be repealed. But the husband and the second wife appealed before the Personal Status Court.

The Deputy Public Prosecutor made it clear . . . that Islamic Shari’a be applied in this case and it (the Islamic Law) allows a man to marry four wives, and called for the validity of the marriage.

The defense said that . . . Coptic Orthodox Law stipulates that a second marriage is not allowed for any party as long as the first marriage is still valid.

The Court of Appeals in considering the case rules that the second marriage is valid and supported the demand by the Deputy Public Prosecutor to apply the law of the country to all the disputes related to personal status cases. (*Egyptian Gazette*, April 7, 1978, 3)

The ruling was seen by Christians as an assault on their personal-status laws. It appeared to them to be an attempt to apply a uniform code of law in Egypt based on Islamic shari’a. As a result, representatives of various Christian denominations met with the Coptic pope, Shenouda, and agreed to try to work out a common policy concerning marriage and divorce in order to prevent the application of Islamic law to Christian cases. They particularly objected to the fact

that when discrepancies appeared in the laws of various Christian denominations, Muslim judges filled the legal vacuum by applying Islamic law.

At that time in 1978, there was growing pressure on the national government to return to orthodoxy in Islam, in particular to apply Islamic law beyond just personal-status jurisdictions to include criminal codes—such as hand-cutting for thieves, stoning for adultery, death for apostasy, and so on—as was the practice in Saudi Arabia. Christians and moderate Muslims were adamantly opposed to an expansion in the law that they feared might replace existing personal-status laws. In particular, they worried about “death for apostasy” laws⁹ because of “insincere” Christian conversions to Islam and then back to Christianity to take advantage of Islam’s freer divorce laws.

An editorial in an Egyptian newspaper at the time reasoned that “the Hadith¹⁰ which states ‘whoever changes his religion kill him’ (Bukhari 88:1) cannot be accepted at face value for this would mean that every change of faith, including a non-Muslim who became a Muslim, a Jew who becomes Christian must be killed.” The editorial went on to explain that, in talking about changing religions, the Hadith meant crossing over to the enemy camp to fight against Muslims. In support of this interpretation, the editors quoted another Hadith (Bukhari 87:6) that says the life of a Muslim may be taken if “he forsakes his religion and separates himself from his community.”¹¹

The Christian community initiated a fast to protest the new apostasy proposals, and after a few weeks, church authorities met with President Sadat who assured them that the proposals would not come before the Parliament in final form. Although the matter was dropped at the time, Christians continued to worry that the issue might be raised in the future.

Proselytizing

Another law that discouraged movement across religious lines was the government regulation against proselytizing those of other faiths, a law mainly directed at Christians converting Muslims to their faith, since there seemed to be no obstacle to Muslims offering incentives to Christians to convert. This ruling was undoubtedly an outgrowth of the active role Christian missionaries took in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although unsuccessful in converting many Muslims, missionary efforts encouraged defections from the Coptic to Protestant denominations and probably prevented some Christians from defecting to Islam:

Ansaf was reading a story from the Bible in the religious service when Um M., a Muslim, walked in. She had brought her two children to the literacy class and then came looking for Ansaf. When she saw her neighbor Um G. sitting in the

meeting, she came over and sat down next to her. Ansaf was visibly shaken and momentarily lost her place in the reading. It was against the law to have a Muslim in the service and very awkward for Ansaf. In a few minutes, Mme Habib came in to give the main sermon, interrupting Ansaf's reading again. Ansaf finished the story quickly and Mme Habib began. She talked about the importance of giving ourselves wholeheartedly to God, "We must make an effort to learn our Bible the way the Muslims learn their Koran by memorizing passages for inspiration." Ansaf leaned over and whispered, "One of them is here! A Muslim!" Mme Habib replied, "Never mind, it doesn't matter." Then she asked if the women in the audience could remember biblical texts or other stories about how God helps people who have faith in him. A few recited texts they remembered and she commented on each one. One woman told how God had laid a hand on her when she was sick. Another woman stood up and began, "The other day, a Muslim woman came to me and asked what the difference was between a Muslim and a Christian." Mme Habib and Ansaf looked nervous. The woman continued, "I told her we are the people of Abraham and you are the people of Hagar."¹² Mme Habib broke in, "Right you are, but in the end we are all children of God!" and she talked on about how we were all equal, and that what was important was how we conducted our lives. The woman cut off in midsentence looked surprised and sat down, realizing she would not be allowed to finish her story. Later Ansaf told me they were afraid she might say something that the Muslim woman shouldn't hear, "but thank God, she didn't say anything and we told her to sit down."

One of the problems about a vaguely worded law was that people were not sure what constituted proselytizing.

The Bulaq Center wanted to establish a small library for the children of the literacy classes. Through the church, Ansaf could acquire inexpensive and simple children's books, but the problem was that the content of the books was church-related. The board suggested various ways to use the books so they wouldn't conflict with prohibitions against giving religious instruction to Muslims who were the majority in these classes. One idea was to have separate cabinets for Christian and Muslim materials. Finally, the board decided it would be too risky to use the religious books. The priest in charge of the classes, however, unilaterally reversed this decision when he came up with what he thought was the perfect solution to the problem. He went out and bought Islamic books, "so they can't accuse us of teaching Muslims Christianity." A board meeting was called with the priest not in attendance, and one member said, "Why ever did he do that? He has doubly wronged our people by withholding Christian books and giving them Muslim books." The unanimous decision was to revert to the previous plan of separate cabinets, since we had both sets of books and "they shouldn't go to waste."

There was no doubt that separate marriage laws and laws prohibiting proselytizing discouraged casual movement across the Muslim-Christian boundary. Christians were never sure how these laws might be interpreted in the future or if enforcement might be tightened if political Islam became more popular.

Rituals, Festivals, and Practices

Religious rituals and festivals created separation of another kind both between the denominations of Christianity and between Christians and Muslims. In the dense Bulaq neighborhoods, it was not unusual for people to participate in the public traditions of the other—Christian or Muslim—even when, strictly speaking, they were not “theirs.”¹³ Christians, for example, adjusted their schedules during Ramadan and refrained from eating in public or enjoyed public aspects of celebrations. Several Coptic men told me how as adolescents they joined Muslim friends for *iftar* (breaking the fast) or visiting bazaars during Ramadan, or they put on their best clothes and strolled along the Nile with them during the holidays of *‘Id al-Fitr* or *‘Id al-Adha*.

Knowledge of One Another's Practices

One might assume that living next to one another in Bulaq, Christians and Muslims might develop greater knowledge of each other's beliefs. To a certain extent, this was true. In the center, for example, a wall chart exhorted Christian and Muslim mothers to nurse their babies at intervals determined by the Muslim calls to prayer. Even though prayer calls were an exclusively Islamic phenomenon, there seemed no problem in using them to convey a health message in a Christian institution. In the more private aspects of religion, however, there was less knowledge:

At a visit to Um M., a Muslim, she urged Ansaf, “Pray, will you. I want to see what your praying is like. Show me how you pray the Christian way.” (She seemed to expect some sort of physical activity to accompany the act as with Muslim prayers.) “All right, I’ll do it so you can see. Just watch.” And Ansaf prayed, but I noticed she didn’t mention the names of anyone present for a blessing as she usually did, and I wondered if it was because Um M. was a Muslim. Afterward Um M. asked, “Why do you close your eyes and turn your face down?” “Because then I am not distracted by what’s going on around me.” “Well we think that’s important too—not noticing what is on the right or left, only looking straight ahead.” They were both looking for commonalities in their praying.

There were other times when members of both groups seemed ignorant of each other’s practices:

All the students of the center's literacy classes were invited to the wedding of their Christian teacher in the nearby quarter of Shubra. Most of the students were Muslims and were excited about attending the service. Some said they had never been in a church before, and since mosque services are mainly for men, they had little experience with formal ceremonies of this kind. They giggled and commented throughout the ceremony, straining to understand the symbolic aspects of the rituals, such as the "sewing together of the bride and groom" and later their crowning. The girls shouted across to Ansaf in another pew asking her to explain. The priest became irritated with their noise and several times stopped the ceremony to quiet them down. Finally, he cut the service short and stomped down the aisle, stopping briefly to apologize to me—the only foreigner in the room—and explaining that he hoped I would attend other weddings: "This isn't a good example of our weddings. These people don't know how to behave in churches."

In details of religious practice that took place in public space, people had a fairly good knowledge of others' practices but not so much those practiced in private spaces.

*Differences in Rituals and Practices*¹⁴

It was clear that differences in rituals and practices created boundaries. More surprising was that these differences at times seemed to become a competition. Christians vigorously defend their practices as "just as religious as Muslim ones," as if fearful that if the other's practices were more attractive (more demanding, more moral, or even more celebratory), there might be a temptation to convert. It seemed (at least to me) as if this insecurity played a role in keeping Christian practices from evolving.¹⁵ Even though shaped by Coptic Orthodox authorities a long time ago and not subject to change by local Christians (except by neglect or lack of resources), the major ones seemed to hold sway in one form or another among the mainly Coptic families of Bulaq.¹⁶

What were the parallel traditions promoted by Muslim and Christian authorities that filtered down to local communities?¹⁷ First, both groups sought moral authority in written sources, the Koran and the Bible, seeing them as the literal word of God. Although Christian denominations elsewhere in the world have mostly dropped literal interpretations of the Bible, it would (in my observation) be difficult for the Coptic Church to do so, since it might imply that their documents were less "true" than the Muslim ones. Muslims also accept the Bible as coming from God through his messenger Jesus but believe distortions were introduced by its multitude of authors. God, they believe, sent messages to the Prophet Muhammad to correct these distortions, and for that reason, Islam was a superior refinement on Judaism and Christianity.

Second, both groups linked their teachings to approved rituals, with Islam having five pillars—the profession of faith, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and

alms—while Copts had seven “mysteries”—baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, orders, matrimony, and unction of the sick.¹⁸

Third, Muslims should pray five times a day: *zuhr* (noon), ‘*asr* (afternoon), *magrib* (sunset), ‘*asha* (night), and *fajr* (daybreak).¹⁹ Coptic prayers, which were more observed by clerics, included: morning (dawn), terse (about 9 am), vespers (sunset), compline (at the time of sleep), and matins (midnight). Monks added “The Prayer of the Curtin” after matins.²⁰

Fourth, Muslims fasted the entire month of Ramadan during daylight hours. Copts fasted an average of about 200 days a year and up to 268, including Wednesdays and Fridays, between Easter and Pentecost, during Advent, before Easter, and at special fasts for the apostles and for the Virgin Mary.²¹ Protestants gave up a favorite indulgence at Lent. Muslims abstained from food and drink altogether during daylight hours, while the Copts’ fasting usually required eating vegetarian and nondairy with no animal products and abstaining from sex. One Protestant who seemed chagrined at the comparative insignificance of their fasting remarked, “Well maybe we’re not strong enough to fast like the others.” Copts defended their fasting to me as “just as arduous if not more so” than Muslims’.

Fifth, both Muslims and Christians invested items with supernatural powers even though official Islam prohibited the practice and educated Christians sometimes disparaged it. Christians, for example, saw supernatural power in saints’ names and pictures, crosses and other holy symbols, in holy water, and in communion wafers and wine. Most of the Coptic churches had shrines and relics dedicated to saints where parishioners lit candles or left notes with personal requests. The same figures (e.g., Mary and Jesus) appeared in Islamic doctrine but not in divine form or with supernatural powers. The rejection of iconic figures by official Islam did not prevent Bulaq Muslims from visiting Christian sites or ascribing magical powers to Christian symbols. Islam also had its “corruptions” in the power of saint’s tombs, in *mulids* (anniversaries of various holy personages), in relics of religious figures, and in mosques where members of the Prophet’s family were commemorated. They frequently attended Christian sacred spaces and events, some would say out of ignorance of what was approved by their own theologians, but also because many happily joined almost any festive public occasion.

Sixth, beliefs about the hereafter irrevocably separated Christians and Muslims, with each believing they had exclusive access to their own versions of paradise. Both believed in a Judgment Day in which people were separated based on specific criteria that determined whether they should be rewarded for a virtuous life or punished for misdeeds. For Christians, only the “saved”—those who led a good life and accepted the precepts of Christianity—would go to heaven.

Seventh, a core tenet distinguishing Christians and Muslims was the divinity of Christ. To Muslims, Jesus was a messenger of God but a human one. To go to their paradise, one should recognize the teachings of Muhammad as paramount and accept that Islam is the one true faith, as well as perform good deeds. Through these exclusionary clauses, both groups reserved the rewards of the afterlife for their own members. On philosophical grounds, this required commitment to one set of beliefs or the other, placing a permanent stigma on members of the other group.

As noted previously, parallel traditions appeared to retard change, since any weakening of one side's traditions would make that group appear less pious or moral than the other. Murad notes an already existing bias toward the status quo. He says that there are "many mysteries in our religion which we accept with reverent acquiescence just because they are revealed by God . . . despite the evidence of our senses and our reason." Egyptian Copts "are brought up to preserve most carefully the Christian Faith in its very early form and hand it over to the younger generation without alterations."²²

This Coptic view corresponds closely with the Muslim view that the most authentic and trustworthy interpretations come from persons as close to the Prophet and his era as possible. Knowledge should be transmitted through the generations but with as few changes as possible. These traditions of authenticity, however, do not preclude an emotional sense of belonging to a religion that is just as observant and moral as any other.

As usual, Christians seemed most conscious of maintaining comparable standards, perhaps to avoid defections. Muslims, secure in their dominant position, seemed more relaxed about their members attending or observing Christian rituals. In the 1970s, it was common to hear Muslims say, "We are all people of the Book," as a reason for accommodating members of the three revealed religions. The phrase is rarely heard in more recent times, as the lines of separation have deepened.

The paradox of belief, ritual, and practice as observed in Bulaq was that on one side, the differences helped define the boundaries of communities, while on the other, they seemed to stimulate the Christians in a competition to sustain them. Muslims' core beliefs had the benefit of being fixed in jurisprudence, while most Christian ones seemed more open to interpretation.

Similarities in Muslim and Christian Values

At the same time that there were differences and parallelisms in Muslim and Christian rituals and practices, there were similarities in values that likely reflected the common cultural understandings of Egyptians. Ansaf drew not only on a tradition of Christian religious sources for her sermons but also on

Islamic ones and, as far as they could be differentiated, general cultural understandings. In other words, Christians evaluated moral behavior in much the same way as all Egyptians did—in terms of its appropriateness in specific contexts and relationships—between family members, relatives, coreligionists, neighbors, friends, school mates, colleagues, or strangers. Informally, they assessed whether behavior was roughly laudatory, approved, appropriate, neutral, inappropriate, or disapproved. These were much the same valuations as those codified in Sunni Islamic guides to moral behavior (discussed in Chapter 6) that separated human behaviors formally into ones that were obligatory, recommended, morally neutral, reprehensible, or forbidden under Islam. An important difference was that Christian understandings were not formalized in legal principles on which their codes of law were based (except Christian personal-status laws), and therefore each generation had to be socialized in right thinking in the course of growing up from elders, friends, church homilies, Sunday school classes, and general morality tales. Their similar understandings strengthened the connections between Muslims and Christians, and in Bulaq at least, the similarities led to religious spokespersons of both groups exhorting their members to be good neighbors and treat others with respect, as well as to follow their shared moral values. It meant both groups ascribed to the public rhetoric of “We are all getting along and there is no problem” even when privately the reverse was true. These common views, in effect, constituted the shared conceptual framework that I call “culture.” It is, of course, difficult to say whether these shared values emerged from their different religious experiences or the reverse, from shared cultural experiences.

The fact that Christians and Muslims ascribed to many of the same values is not surprising, but it meant that when clear differences arose, they often became a major source of conflict. When clashes between Muslims and Christians arose after the 2011 Uprising, they were often preceded by rumors about, for example, Christian men in relationships with Muslim women (forbidden by Islam) or Christians converted against their will to Islam. Or they might result in Muslims attacking symbols of Christianity, such as churches or Christian businesses, especially those selling pork or alcoholic products.

Christian Denominational Boundaries

It is important to note before closing this chapter that differences in rituals and practices also created boundaries among Christian denominations. Indeed, people were quick to point out the differences to me, such as variations in attitudes during prayer, in the kissing or not kissing of hands at the mention of the name of God or Jesus, or whether making the sign of the cross was required as a gesture of respect. They held different views about the nature of Christ,

the symbols they used in communion, the extent and type of fasting, the use of music in church services, and the specific requirements for marriage and divorce. Copts held services on Fridays instead of Sundays and held Christmas on a different date. And of course, Copts stressed their Pharaonic and nationalistic origins,²³ while other denominations stressed their Western links.

Despite these differences, among the small sample of non-Coptic Christians I knew (mostly from middle or upper classes), boundaries seemed fairly porous with regard to attending religious services in one another's churches, giving and receiving charity, and contracting marriages. Basically, all Christians in Bulaq followed Coptic practices and married other Copts, but that didn't prevent them from scoffing at Episcopalian or Protestant rituals that they came to know through Mme Ansaf and Episcopalian organizers of the center. Sometimes it seemed easier for them to accept Christian and Muslim differences than it was to accept the "misinterpretations" of other Christian denominations.

Summary

This chapter has looked at some of the formal elements that divided Christians and Muslims and, in some cases, propelled them to take actions to preserve their community boundaries. Although distinct differences of law, doctrine, belief, and practice drew clear boundaries in some areas, in others they were blurred by the Egyptian cultural values both groups shared. In some cases, the competitive instincts of Christians seemed to inspire parallel practices that ensured Christian observances were just as arduous and praiseworthy as Muslim ones. The next chapter will look more closely at everyday interactions between Muslims and Christians to see how these values translated into their everyday relations.

CHAPTER 11

Everyday Interactions between Christians and Muslims

In Bulaq during the 1970s and 1980s, poor Christians became increasingly uneasy about Muslims, as tensions were growing in the country as a whole. Part of this was, of course, the strained relations between President Sadat and Pope Shenouda and the rise of conservative Islam after the disastrous war with Israel in 1967.

The growing fundamentalism could be seen in Bulaq in the increasing numbers of Muslim male and female students attending public universities who began wearing Islamic dress.¹ Mosque attendance also soared, and there was a brisk trade in religious books and tapes of radical preachers, including both foreign and local ones. The number of conflicts that could be identified as sectarian increased in the popular quarters of Cairo as well as in villages of Upper and Lower Egypt, often instigated by radicalized university students returning on holidays.

In Bulaq, it was virtually impossible for Christians to avoid meeting Muslims daily. This chapter looks at their everyday interactions mainly from the Christian point of view, since I was more privy to their candid feelings. Earlier we saw how important it was for Christian parents to ensure control over the marriage process, at least partly to prevent their daughters from marrying Muslim men. We noted also how the conduct of personal relations required distinguishing obligations owed to kin and nonkin, with a grey area in between for coreligionists. In both these cases, marriages and personal relations, important lines were drawn that created boundaries between Christian and Muslim communities.

An important element in knowing how to behave with strangers was to recognize their religious identity as quickly as possible. This chapter describes the identifiers of religion and shows how Christians responded to them. From my experience, Christians seemed more anxious about interactions with Muslims than Muslims with Christians and were more likely to express negative opinions.

The Migrant Experience

In the often homogeneous communities or quarters of Upper Egyptian villages from which many Christians emigrated, it had been easier to maintain separateness between the faiths than in Bulaq, where most people were strangers. Villagers assumed people in their vicinity were of the same religious faith, or if not, they were known Muslims with whom contacts could be formalized. Paradoxically, the separateness that preserved harmonious relations in villages might have the reverse effect in Bulaq, where aloofness could be construed as hostility.

Observers have noted that as long as migrants came to Cairo, they infused lower-class neighborhoods with a continuous stream of conservative rural values. In establishing cordial relations between Muslims and Christians in Bulaq, the center had to modify the migrants' expectations about separateness. This was accomplished by providing venues such as the literacy and sewing classes, where safe interactions between Christians and Muslims could take place, by continually reiterating the importance of getting along with everyone, and by Ansaf modeling desirable behavior in her relations with Muslims in the quarter. She would praise the Christians who expressed positive attitudes about Muslims and rebuke those who did not. It was hard to know whether her actions took conscious effort or were simply the product of a mind-set that felt natural sympathy for people regardless of who they were.

A major difficulty for migrants settling in the city was the lack of nearby kin. Even if kin migrated earlier, they were just as likely to live in other parts of Bulaq or more distant quarters of the city. At first, migrants kept up intimate contact with their kin elsewhere, but distance and expense eventually diminished their contacts until they only visited a few close relatives. In this vacuum of intimacy, people searched for commonalities among acquaintances to form new friendships. Foremost among the significant ones were neighbors from the same religious backgrounds or similar areas of Egypt. A proverb was often recited saying that a nearby neighbor was more important than a faraway relative.

One woman compared Bulaq with the slightly more affluent quarter of Qulali, where more government employees lived: "In Bulaq, we are like a village to the extent that everyone knows everyone else, and we all try to help one other. In Qulali, it's different. People are richer and live more to themselves. They don't need each other." People seemed to look for ways to be helpful to one another. They frequently said, "We help because we know someday we may be the ones needing help." By this, they meant help in weddings, funerals, or any of the normal life events, but also they meant the precariousness of their financial situation where they felt only a step away from impoverishment. Exchanges of services provided an opportunity to become close with neighbors—in some cases almost as close as relations with kin.

Identifying Coreligionists

Christians in Bulaq had an uncanny ability to size up others and place them in their correct social and religious contexts. For them, it was important to know which strangers might be hostile or friendly, from the same social class or a class to which they should show deference, from the same or another religious group. This skill depended on being able to accurately assess clusters of subtle characteristics. Interestingly, Egyptians from higher classes were often unable to read these signs in the lower classes, or if they had some limited knowledge, it was picked up from servants or gate guards or from visits to an ancestral village.

The details of clothing gave the first indication.² In the 1970s, gross characteristics in women's dress roughly identified those from Upper Egypt and those from the Delta and, by extrapolation, indicated whether they were Christian or Muslim. Christians coming mostly from Upper Egypt (in the south) wore black waisted dresses that fell to midcalf length over pajama-like pants and with a heavily fringed shawl that covered their tightly scarved heads. Lower Egyptians (from the north), who were mostly Muslims, wore wide "granny" dresses that fell to the feet from a yoke. In public, they wore a black overdress in the same mode, while in their homes, they often wore colorful, sometimes patterned dresses.³ These distinctions in later years became blurred, especially among younger Christian women and those born in the city. These women adopted the "city" overdress—wide and flowing—to make it more difficult to distinguish their rural origins, they said, "to keep from being cheated" by shop owners.

If dress didn't identify their origins or ethnicities, other details might. The more common ones were dialect, names, pictures, gestures, jewelry, and tattoos that will be discussed in more detail in later sections. Sometimes omissions of detail were just as important as their presence, so the whole constellation had to be assessed.

When asked how she identified women's religious affiliations, Ansaf confirmed that she usually knew by their dress. But when a woman entered a shop one day with the kind of head shawl Ansaf had once told me was Christian, Ansaf explained that the woman was obviously a Muslim because she was buying material for a "Bedouin style" dress that no Christian would wear. She had unconsciously sifted the information and come to a conclusion even before I asked. She added that if the woman had been visiting the center clinic and was wearing the shawl, she would certainly be a Christian, since in that context, anyone wearing the "southern" style was inevitably a Christian:

One day, we were visiting an old Christian church. Inside, two girls identified by Ansaf as Muslim were trying to make coins stick to the glass covering the picture

of St. George. "It will stick if you are good with God," one said to us. Since Muslims also came to these shrines, I asked, "But how do you know these girls are Muslims?" "Because they didn't make the sign of the cross when they entered and because of the way they wear their *milayas* [cloaks]. If Christians wear it, they wrap the corner around their heads while Muslims tuck it under their arms."

Several Christian women said they could tell a Muslim by the way she was groomed. According to them, the threat of divorce had a perceptible effect on how Muslim women took care of themselves. Mme Habib concurred saying, "Our Christians look so sad; they don't take care of themselves or dress neatly or even wash their faces. Muslims always look better; they are alert, dress well, and are clean. Our people look dull and lifeless. Muslims look for ways to get ahead and improve themselves."

A woman walked in after the religious service and asked to talk to Ansaf. She was a Muslim, I thought, and then reviewed the details that let me know that fact. There was the yoked dress, a slightly more olive skin, heavily kohl-lined eyes, several gold bracelets, plumper body, and other signs of a person who cared about her grooming. Ansaf agreed and noted the same details.

In a *zar* (spirit plaction) ceremony one day, Ansaf remarked, "Muslim women know how to dress and eat. Look how beautifully plump these women are. They live in the present while Christians always worry about the future—saving for their children's education and marriages. They spend as little as possible on food or clothing."

These examples show that the same details can take on different meanings in different contexts. Christians were constantly sifting through these signs to infer the identity of people they met even casually. Perhaps related, they also wore more visible markers themselves: crosses on chains around their necks or tattoos of the Coptic cross on their wrists or chins (mostly elderly women). One woman told me, "Our parents put the crosses there so we could never hide the fact that we were Christian or renounce Christianity when we grew older."

Other markers helped with the composite of clues. For example, chances for correct identification increased markedly if one knew the full name of an individual: the given name and father's and/or family name.⁴ With lists of full names, people could identify religious affiliation accurately about 80 percent of the time. They only made mistakes when confronted with ambiguous names that could be either Christian or Muslim. In Egypt, names such as Fatima (Muslim), Miriam (Christian), Muhammad (Muslim), Abdullah (Muslim), or Girgious (Christian) usually belonged to one group or the other.⁵ The list of names was, of course, much longer.⁶

One older woman noted that in different historic periods, the fashion in names changed for Christians. When the Turks were in Egypt, Christians gave their children Turkish names.⁷ Then the British came and the Christians gave

their children names like Mary, Mabel, and Suzie. Right after independence, Egyptians avoided names that were closely related to religion.⁸ By the 1970s, Christians more frequently gave children religious names, but eventually, as they felt threatened in later decades, they gave them ambiguous names that could be Muslim or Christian: “One middle-class worker at the center told the story of a cousin who was qualified for a job that the Christian foreman of the company wanted to recommend him for. The foreman was ready to hire him until he realized he had a recognizably Christian name. He said he was sorry but Muslims would accuse him of bringing in mainly Christians, and it might jeopardize his own job: ‘If your name was not so clearly Christian we could have done it.’” Once they had generally located a person from the south, for example, Christians tried to identify his or her village to see if they knew it and then the particular families (*bait*) within the village. This sequence occurred whether a person was addressed directly or discussed by others. The important point was that for recent migrants, their reference point was still the rural villages from which they or their families came:

One woman explained why it was important. We ask about family because in our own villages, once we know the person’s family, we know everything about them, most importantly whether the family has a good reputation or not. Being rich or poor isn’t as important as reputation. From the name, we also know the religion, but that is less important in the village. In Bulaq, there is no point in asking about the family name, since people come from all over and we can’t know everyone’s family. Here we just try to figure out whether they are Christian or Muslim and then maybe where they live in Bulaq. From that, however, we know very little about them.

From her comments, it was obvious that in the city, religious affiliation was the default mode—that is, the quickest way to sort out potentially hostile or friendly people in an environment where most people were strangers. People didn’t like to talk about why they wanted to know if a person was Christian. Usually they answered such questions with “public” statements suggesting that religious differences were not important and that Muslims and Christians were the same. But this was not how they talked when caught off guard or when alone with other Christians. Certainly knowledge of people’s religious identities affected the openness with which they felt they could interact with strangers. Religion was fundamental to knowing how to relate to new acquaintances. As members of the lower classes, Christians saw Muslims as a source of competition while Christians were potentially a support.

Patterns of speech, pronunciation, and word usage gave other clues to Christian or Muslim identity—not invariably but commonly. For example, Upper

Egyptians spoke with a slightly different accent, the most conspicuous aspect being the soft “g” that was hard in the north. The term *‘abla*, a respectful Turkish form of address used for older sisters, teachers, and older females tended to be used more by Muslims. Muslims call Jesus *Seyyidna ‘Isa bin Miriam*, while Christians call him *Yasu’ al-Masih*. The word *Nabi* (Prophet) is, of course, used more often by Muslims and almost exclusively by Muslims in casual conversation as an expletive. The expression *wallah* (by God) is similarly used more often by Muslims. The expression *ya Rab* (oh God) seemed to be used more by Christians but not exclusively. The two groups also tended to favor certain greeting phrases: Christians used *sabah al-khair* (good morning) rather than the *Salam alekum* of Muslims:⁹

We were trying to find a taxi one day to take a sick woman to the hospital and having no luck. Finally, Ansaf accosted an obviously upper-class man in a shiny, new imported car: “Please we have Um Dawud here; she is not a member of our family, but she is sick and we need to take her to the hospital. Can you help us?” He answered, “I would but I am late for an appointment,” looking at his watch but then hesitating. “No, never mind, I will do it. I’m a Christian like you and we must help her.” Later I asked Ansaf how they recognized one another as Christians. She said, “I saw that sticker of the Virgin Mary on his steering wheel, so when I asked for help I made sure he would know who we were. I didn’t say ‘in the name of the Prophet’ as a Muslim would, only ‘please,’ and I gave her name ‘Um Dawud,’ which is more often Christian.” By inserting the fact that we were not relatives and therefore it was an act of charity, she put pressure on him to help.

Christians frequently used identifying symbols in their cars, shops, and homes—such as crosses, bibles, and pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.¹⁰ When I asked one Christian how she felt when she saw these symbols, she replied:

“When I see a cross hanging in a shop or on the mirror of a taxi, I immediately feel a connection and relax.” But then she exclaimed, as if just noticing the contradiction, “But did you see that Christian storekeeper who sold us a box of crayons the other day. When we got home, we noticed that he had slipped the cheaper ones into our bag. I can’t get over the fact that he cheated us and, moreover, that he probably thought that as Christians we wouldn’t complain.” I asked, “Do you think Christians are more honest?” “Well I didn’t expect him to do that to us as Christians.” She added that if they knew each other well, he wouldn’t have risked his reputation that way.

In another shop, when two Muslim customers left, the Christian owner said, “Muslims like to buy in Christian-owned shops because they think they will get fairer prices with us.”

Perhaps that's the reason Christian shop owners always displayed religious symbols—pictures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and St. George—so prominently when the majority of their customers presumably were Muslims. There were two possible explanations: they may have been seen as protective amulets, or the shopkeepers genuinely believed they would attract more customers. Probably both rationales were involved. Muslim merchants, with Islam's aversion to human iconography, hung pictures of the Grand Mosque at Mecca, the Kaaba, elaborate calligraphy of religious sayings, or they displayed a Koran protected in a carefully decorated box.

It was hard to gauge the reactions to these symbols. When asked about his prices, one shopkeeper said, "We Christians are like relatives, so I will give you a price of 2 pt less per meter for this cloth than I would Muslims."

When bargaining became serious, Ansaf would say to a Christian storekeeper that she was buying for a Christian welfare center and soon he would lower the price because "we are all Christians." In a Muslim's store, she would say she was buying for poor people without mentioning that they were Christians. There too, the price would go down and she might also hear a "God bless you for your work."

It's not clear whether religious affiliation made a difference in the actual price asked of Christians or Muslims in stores owned by their coreligionists. It was apparent though that people believed religious affiliation made a difference and perhaps that was the important point. Certainly for minority Christians, the desire to stick together reinforced this belief.

There were many more elements that, when added to these markers, made it impossible for close acquaintances not to know another's religious identity. There were, for example, different holidays during the year with visible preparations such as new clothes, house cleaning, and special foods. Muslim celebrations were the most elaborate and visible, with the killing of sacrificial sheep that had been fattening in someone's courtyard for days. Even the absence of such preparations was a clear indicator that a person was not of the same faith.

Friendships

Were intimate friendships more likely to develop between members of the same faith because these relationships felt safer? This seemed to be true generally, although there were certainly instances of friendships that formed across religious lines. A contributing factor seemed to be whether friendships were formed during childhood or adulthood. As noted earlier, middle-class Egyptians had a tradition of forming lifelong friendships with groups of childhood and school friends (*shillas*) and those graduating from the same universities (called *dufa*). These traditions encouraged young people to join groups whose members were

not just from the usual family and religious backgrounds: “A Muslim man who grew up in Bulaq, but later moved to another part of Cairo, told me his boyhood friends had included both Christians and Muslims: ‘Sometimes we went to sing in the church choir because we liked the music, and other times the Christian boys would come to the mosque with us to pray on Fridays.’ These friends of his boyhood, he noted, were still some of his closest friends.” Once I spent a week in a Delta village with medical students from Al-Azhar University training in rural medicine. When village students home on vacation learned that a Christian student had joined Muslims in the mosque for Friday prayers, they threatened the group angrily. The situation was only calmed by an Al-Azhar professor who came from the village. In the ensuing negotiations, however, the issues escalated to include complaints about coed focus groups of married couples discussing birth control and the promotion of methods that would limit reproduction (*takhdid*) rather than space it (*tansim*): “Only Allah should decide how many children a couple should ultimately have.” These complaints took the professors by surprise, as though this was new in this usually hospitable village. The episode, however, showed the growing tension between Muslims and Christians in the time and the part public universities played in radicalizing young people.

Adult Christians in Bulaq seemed more cognizant of the “dangers” of too much intimacy with Muslims—from fear of gossip or that their children might become “too involved.” Women in general were not supposed to have much time after their chores to socialize with others. So unless there was a neighbor to shell peas with on the front stoop, the logistics of forming friendships could be difficult. The only acceptable places to meet regularly were the public water taps (and only while waiting in line), the once-a-week religious meetings at the Bulaq Center, or in the embroidery workshops of Mme. Aziz, the priest’s wife. The first and third venues threw Muslims and Christians together, while the second was exclusively for Christians. Only the workshops gave enough time to develop true friendships and then mainly for women who were past the age when children were young.

Neighbors were therefore the most likely candidates for women’s friendships and the most likely to throw Muslims and Christians together.

Daily Interactions

Close living, as noted, made it virtually impossible for Muslims and Christians not to meet. Although most of their interactions seemed unrelated to religion, religion was so much a part of a Christian identity that any act across religious lines took on added meaning. People themselves often referred to this fact:

Once when we were having difficulty carrying a sick woman to a street to flag down transport to the hospital, a hefty Muslim woman handed her baby to a friend and carried the Christian woman for us. Ansaf said, "Wasn't that nice? And she was a Muslim too." Maybe the Muslim woman would have performed the same deed for anyone in need, but Ansaf gave her additional credit for being Muslim and helping a Christian.

We were visiting one of the poorer Christian families. Standing in the corner was a friend, Um I., who checked on the family and occasionally brought them food and other necessities. Speaking to me so Um I. could hear, Ansaf said, "Um I. is a Muslim and a very good woman. She takes care of her neighbors—one she cares for is a paralyzed Coptic man who barely speaks and has been lying in bed for ten years." A few minutes later, we went to visit the man with Um I. "How are things going?" Ansaf asked. "It's a wonderful life, thanks be to God. He has given me everything—a good room and a wonderful neighbor to care for me. What else could I want?" he said.

We visited a spritely old woman, A., who said she was around 77, more or less. She begged us to visit her "Muslim neighbor because she has been so kind to me." A. received her income from charity but barely made it through the month, so her neighbor's help was important. To help repay the kindness, we "honored" the neighbor with a visit.

We visited a Christian woman living in a shack on the roof of a dilapidated building. Several Muslim women¹¹ were feeding their babies and talking in the warm sunshine. Ansaf handed some tangerines to their children. The Christian woman said jokingly, "Oh, don't give to them, they are only Muslims." They laughed and retorted, "We pray like you, don't we?" Another Christian woman standing nearby tried to correct what might be taken as an insult by her less tactful neighbor, saying, "All our neighbors are good people here," and then, apologetically in an aside to me as we entered the shack, added, "We have to say that to the Muslims, you know," as if I might think she was being too accommodating.

At one home, a woman who seemed mentally unbalanced drew us aside and in whispers announced that all those living around her were Muslims. She made a face to indicate how distasteful that was. Ansaf didn't challenge her but changed the subject quickly. Later she made a point of joking with the Muslim neighbors and handing out oranges to their children in an effort to defuse any hostility the Christian woman might have created.

We were visiting a woman who had been caught stealing money from her neighbors. She spent several months in prison for her offense but was now home and Ansaf felt was rehabilitated: "She is a good woman now, and we must open our

hearts to her and take her back into the membership of the center because she truly wants to change.” I asked a neighbor standing there if people living nearby accepted her. “Well, I do because we are, of course, Christians and we must forgive her, but the Muslims who live upstairs don’t. Sometimes they even strike her when they see her and call her a thief.” As happened in Bulaq when there was a defining moment in a person’s life, the event followed her. Ever after she was “the woman who went to prison for stealing money.”

We were taking down particulars of a new member before the religious meeting. In speaking about her children, she moved closer and whispered that one son had become a Muslim “because he loved a Muslim girl and wanted to marry her.” She added, “I haven’t seen him since then and don’t know where he is.” Ansaf murmured words of consolation and then turned to a woman nursing her baby in a doorway nearby. Her instinct made her uneasy about the woman and soon she knew from her accent that she was a Muslim. She quickly gave a little speech about how it really doesn’t matter if someone is Christian or Muslim as long as she prays and gave both women some money from her own purse and some oranges. Then Ansaf asked the Muslim woman if she minded if they prayed, and the Muslim replied that she would fetch her daughter so she could listen too.

There was an affluent Muslim woman in Bulaq, Um M., whose home we visited now and then. If she saw us passing, she would shout out an invitation to have tea with her. Ansaf easily refused invitations from Christians but was afraid to refuse the insistent Um M. for fear of insulting her. Often we took alternate routes to avoid walking under her window. Although we enjoyed her company, we didn’t have the hour or so to satisfy her ideas of minimum hospitality. One day, however, she captured us. I asked her if she had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and she replied that she had not gone yet but hoped to go in the future. I told her I had lived for a time within an hour’s drive of Mecca but had never been able, as a non-Muslim, to go there. The words Christian and Muslim in a single paragraph roused the two women, and I was immediately treated to the usual harangue: “It’s not the same as before when the people of different religious groups lived separately and didn’t get along. Now we live in mixed neighborhoods and are all the same. We love each other and help each other and all pray to the same God. There should be no difference between us. We should be good neighbors to one another,” concluded Um M., with Ansaf agreeing on all points.

A collection of Ansaf’s comments suggests that even her private views about Muslims were unusually sympathetic for a Christian: “Look at this Muslim’s house when we go in, then you will see the difference between Muslims and Christians. Muslims are clean and work hard; they are clever people.” She often remarked on the number of Muslim women out on the street selling things to make money for their households: “They are good people helping their families, not like our lazy

Christians.” She would shout out as she passed them, “You Muslim women are good about working, much better than the Christians.” They took it well, smiling back at her and offering their goods at a lower price for her. The outspokenness of her remarks surprised me, but rather than offending, they seemed to create goodwill.

Mme Habib was sitting with me one day and reiterating her favorite message to make sure I wouldn’t think there were problems between Muslims and Christians, “I want to finish by telling you how much better Christian-Muslim relations are now than they were under the fanatical Turks and even under the British. Sadat, although he is very religious, knows we must all get along—that we are all children of God. Things really are different now. When my children were small, I wouldn’t even let them play with Muslim children, but a Christian woman I admired told me that I was wrong—that all human beings should be treated the same.”

Private Hostility and Stereotyping

A few examples show the kinds of stories Christians told about Muslims, usually starring a hapless Christian persecuted by Muslims. The truth of the stories often could not be confirmed, but what they accomplished was to unite the tellers and listeners as an in-group with similar views of Muslims:

We promised a Muslim girl we would go look at her trousseau, but on the way, we were stopped by a Christian neighbor. “I’m so glad I saw you in time. I was going to tell you not to go to her house. The police are watching, and if they see you go in, they might arrest you. Her father sells hashish and the police have been active recently in Bulaq. She told me to tell you it would be dangerous to visit right now.” We went into the Christian neighbor’s house, and she closed the door: “The stepmother of the girl is a bad woman. Last week she went to a Christian goldsmith and asked to take a gold ring home, saying she would pay him later. He refused and she became angry. Later she returned and asked him to keep a package for her while she was shopping. But she went to the police and said the goldsmith told her he could sell her some hashish. They sent a plainclothes man with her when she returned to ask for the package. Of course, inside they found hashish and the goldsmith was arrested and all the gold in his shop confiscated.”

Most of the details may have been true because we heard similar stories from shopkeepers who knew this man. Such events helped explain why people took care to keep their relations cordial—they feared, as they put it, “attracting the evil eye.”

The next example is likely a figment of the storyteller's imagination, since she frequently gave testimonials at center meetings, usually involving Muslims:

At a meeting, a woman jumped up to tell a story "about why she was thankful to God": "I was on my way to the meeting today when a neighbor greeted me and asked where I was going. I know she's a mischievous sort and began wondering why she asked. Then I remembered I was wearing a gold ring that belongs to my son in the army and realized she wanted to steal it. I told her I was going to a religious service at the center, and she asked to walk with me. I told her there was no point, since she was a Muslim and the meeting was only for Christians, so she left. I want to thank God before you for saving me from the Muslim woman who wanted to steal my ring."

Another area where hostility found an outlet was in economic activity. Christians felt Muslims had a competitive edge over them—that Muslim employers and the government were more likely to hire Muslims. Sometimes, though, Muslims seemed convenient scapegoats for people's own failings: "A very poor client was urged by Ansaf to sell food outside her doorstep to make a little money. 'Oh I couldn't do that,' she replied. 'Everyone around here is Muslim and they wouldn't buy from a Christian.'" Christians also liked to think they had better work ethics than Muslims:

A Christian was telling me that Muslims preferred to hire Christians because they worked harder and did a good job, "They are not careless like Muslims." (This was, of course, the reverse of those Christians who said Muslims only hired Muslims.)

A middle-class resident of Bulaq told us he had just resigned from his job as supervisor in a factory because "conditions had become intolerable." He complained, "I was responsible for my section but could never get anything done because my Muslim boss had no technical skill and never gave me any support. He just sat all day drinking tea and praying. Then he would blame me when our supervisor complained that we didn't achieve our quotas. Actually my boss wanted to keep me on because he knows I work hard and am the only one with the skills to do the job, but I no longer want to take responsibility for accomplishing what can't be done."

I asked two wives of Muslim employers, one a factory owner, what their husbands thought about hiring Christian workers. Their answers were strikingly similar: "One said, 'My husband won't hire Christians anymore. It isn't worth the trouble. Christians always try to get their own people hired and are terribly sensitive when anyone comments about their work.' The other said, 'Christians

make a big deal out of nothing and are never there when someone asks who was responsible for something. And they don't get along with the other employees—they lack generosity of spirit and are sensitive to criticism. There's no denying though that they work hard.” Stereotyping the other created a sense of solidarity among Christians. In themselves, these views, if kept discrete, probably were harmless, and if they became public, there were enough responsible people in both communities to step forward with the standard rhetoric about “all being good neighbors and religion is not an issue.” Still I felt more hostility came from the Christian side—perhaps because I was more aware of their private feelings. If true, it might explain why it was important for churches to support an institution like the Bulaq Center that modeled values of accommodation with the Muslim community.

Summary

By the late 1970s, stories of “Christian victimhood” multiplied among the Bulaq Center members—almost to the point of paranoia. They included reports of Muslims trying to marry Christian girls or offering jobs to Christians if they would convert. One could see it was becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims and Christians to maintain harmonious relations, although certainly Ansaf and other moderates did their best to create a friendly atmosphere.

Four conclusions can be drawn from these Muslim-Christian interactions. First, the residential mixing of Christians and Muslims, although offering opportunities for friendly relations, also provided more opportunities for friction. Second, Christians seemed more conscious of the religious identity of others and were more likely to put a religious spin on their interactions with Muslims. Third, members of both groups responded automatically to incidents that might escalate into a conflict with public rhetoric about how “we are all good people and get along.” The effort to gloss over differences was characteristic of Egyptian culture that valued “peacemaking,” and therefore in this case, religion and culture seemed to be reinforcing one another. The fourth conclusion, not contradicting the others, was that most Bulaq Christians harbored a deep hostility toward Muslims, although they were careful not to express these feelings where Muslims might hear. Part of this hostility may have come from being a minority and poor and believing Muslims received more of society's advantages. Whether or not public efforts at accommodation were inspired by the center's religious meetings, it didn't hurt to have Mme Ansaf reinforcing the value of getting along during her daily presence in Bulaq.

Another way of saying this was that for Christians in Bulaq, Muslims were a convenient dumping ground for private frustrations. One consequence of their suppressed hostility was that, of the acts of charity I observed crossing religious

lines, all were Muslims giving to Christians. Christians might give generously to other Christians, but I never saw anyone giving to Muslims. Sometimes I wondered if the surprise the Christians expressed at Muslims' generosity was because they themselves would not have acted similarly to Muslims. Ansaf was the one example of a Christian giving without condition to Muslims. But she stood out consistently as an exception to the usual Christian caution and reserve toward Muslims.

CHAPTER 12

Christian and Muslim Family Organization

Differences in Muslim and Christian personal-status law had important implications for the ways families in Bulaq organized. Foremost among them were laws involving divorce, but there were also laws and practices related to proselytizing, conversion, adoption, and inheritance that shaped behavior in the two communities.

Household Differences

After visiting Bulaq almost daily for several years, I could identify as easily as Ansaf whether the house we were entering belonged to Christians or Muslims. It was a combination of factors—attitude, appearance, dress, cleanliness, and household organization—not a cluster of traits that could be described in a word.¹

Ansaf attributed the differences to their separate personal-status codes, in particular the prohibition against divorce in Christianity and the ease of divorce in Islam. Muslim women in Bulaq, she said, made more effort to keep themselves and their households clean, to put good food on the table, and to keep their children presentable so their husbands would be satisfied and not divorce them. Christian women, on the other hand, she said, often had slovenly homes, wore torn or dirty clothing, and had young children who often looked uncared for. Muslim women were on the lookout for opportunities for their children, while Christians had to be urged to take advantage of opportunities like those of the center's preschool. People seemed aware of these differences and occasionally spoke about them when Ansaf or Mme Habib voiced frustration at the lack of Christian initiative. Of course, there were exceptions, but enough of a pattern existed so we could identify the religious identity of most families most of the time.

These observations in Bulaq are somewhat surprising given the historic trend for middle-class Christians to be the first to send their children to school in large numbers, while Muslims were more cautious about sending, especially girls, to what were often the better quality Christian schools.

Christian Conceptions of Family Life

Christians conceived of marriage as the irrevocable joining together of a man and a woman into a single unit.² The bonds were sanctified in the church at a wedding ceremony and after that could not be dissolved except under special circumstances if the church allowed an annulment. Consequently, Christian families tended to stay together, breaking up only on the death of a spouse or residentially when children grew up and left home to form their own households. Figures showed that center members had a low rate of marriage breakup despite the harsh economic circumstances of their lives. Separated couples invariably reconciled when the full force of relatives and friends was brought to bear to resolve their quarrels. Reconciliation was recognized by everyone as the only satisfactory answer unless the problem was too severe to be overcome: "One woman in Bulaq had been accused by her husband of 'not being a real woman,' and indeed when a doctor examined her to 'certify' her womanhood, he found she had been born without a vagina. Somehow it had taken her husband more than ten years to separate from her. After her diagnosis, she had reconstructive surgery in hopes of resuming the marriage, but her husband refused to return to her. A judge ruled that since her intentions had been good, her husband must support her. But in this case, the church allowed him to marry again." As a result of restrictions on divorce, the vulnerability in Christian households was not in the bonds between husband and wife who were irrevocably united but in tensions that developed between parents and children. Lower-class Christian parents were overprotective of their children, fearing not only in the case of the girls that they might be enticed into inappropriate marriages with Muslims but also that boys might convert to Islam. If this were to happen, social pressure from the Christian community would encourage parents to sever ties with their children. The priest who directed the Bulaq Center's nursery school commented, "It's difficult to enroll Christian children in the nursery school because Christian mothers are afraid to let their children out of their sight. They spoil them and do things for the children that the children should do for themselves. Muslims, on the other hand, teach their children independence and give them responsibilities at home. When they hear about the nursery school, they rush to enroll their children because of the benefits to them." There was a similar reluctance of Christians to enroll daughters in the center's literacy and handicraft classes. Ansaf said Muslims wanted their daughters to learn, while Christians

worried about what might happen on the way to school or how they would be treated by Muslim girls in the class. The few Christian girls in attendance were usually there because Ansaf urged their parents to send them and agreed to personally take responsibility for their welfare.

Although primary education was supposed to be compulsory in Egypt, Christians in Bulaq were sometimes slow to send their children to formal public schools. Of the 104 Christian families registered with the center that had school-age children at home, only 69 percent (59 out of 85 with daughters) sent their daughters while 73 percent (72 out of 87 with sons) sent their sons. The dropout rate for these children was high throughout the primary years, particularly among girls and especially at the end of the primary cycle.

The tensions between Christian parents and their children were most evident in the relationships of parents with their sons. Parents' efforts to restrict their sons were especially stressful in the sons' late teens and before marriage. At that time, parents expected sons to contribute to family income, while the sons wanted to marry and start their own households. The more money they contributed to the household, the longer it took for them to amass the sums they needed to marry. As a consequence, many males in the quarter were forced to postpone marriage into their thirties, after helping their sisters marry first. Once they married, their parents preferred—if space were available—for sons (and sometimes daughters) to bring their spouses into their parents' home where they would continue to contribute to the household income. Rarely however was space available. Parents would frequently refuse to let their own daughters marry men who planned to move in with their own parents after marriage, believing that the young wife would be called on to do the heavy work of the household. Much depended on the negotiating power of the bride's family or the willingness of the man's family to forego his future help.

Um W. (70) and Abu W. (80) were the progenitors of a large Christian family that, despite housing shortages in Bulaq, had managed to achieve the ideal of keeping most of their family together. Their once spacious quarters of two rooms and a hallway had slowly been encroached on. When the first son W. (45) married, he took the bigger of the two rooms and raised a family of four sons and two daughters there. When W.'s eldest son married, he found a rental room downstairs in the same building, and soon he and his wife had a son and a daughter. Another of Um W.'s sons worked in Libya for several years, and when he returned and married, he was able to afford an apartment on the outskirts of Bulaq. Um W. was not happy that they were so far away and commented, "His wife is too proud to have much to do with us and insists on him spending all his money on her. When we send her food we have cooked, she refuses to eat it. Before they married, she was always saying, 'Oh, what can I do for you, my mother,' and making compliments, but now she ignores us."

Um W. insisted on a close, almost daily, relationship with her children. Another daughter married a well-to-do merchant and had four daughters and a son. Though she lived two short alleyways from Um W., they were not on speaking terms and had not seen each other for years. Their basic quarrel was that Um W.'s son who worked in Libya brought back better gifts for his sister than for Um W. The latter complained that her daughter encouraged him to pay more attention to her, while she should be receiving more expensive gifts because she was his mother and was poorer than his sister.

By Bulaq standards, Um W. was not in fact poor. Her husband worked as a guard in one of two used-furniture shops owned by their son. Together he and the son earned more than LE 50 a month, and Ansaf estimated that Um W.'s grandson who worked as a mechanic probably earned a similar amount. The 12 members of the family that continued to live together therefore had a good standard of living, with the added advantage of access to inexpensive furniture when members of the family wanted to marry.

Muslim Conceptions of Family Life

Muslim personal-status law, by contrast to Christian law, viewed marriage as a contract between two persons that, like any contract, could be dissolved. Right after marriage, the couple was most vulnerable and people claimed their loyalties at that time remained largely with their families of origin. When children arrived, there was tangible evidence of the union, and the bride and groom formed a family unit by virtue of their mutual interest in their children.

Still, the fact that men could divorce easily and take custody of the children after their early years remained a cause of permanent tension between husband and wife. Women felt the insecurity most keenly and, as noted, put more effort into their appearance, their homes, and their children. Although most women in Bulaq did not work outside the home, the few who did were usually Muslims, just as it was Muslims who were most active in seeking opportunities to learn skills and make money. Property, whether in gold or furnishings, was kept separately in a woman's name and, theoretically at least, her earnings if she worked were not supposed to go for family support but kept for her own use. Women in Bulaq with arms ringed in gold bangles were invariably Muslims. A Christian commented, "When a Muslim husband gives his wife gold, it's a sign he loves her very much, so of course, she wants everyone to see his love. It means he feels the relationship is secure or otherwise he wouldn't take money from his own pocket to put into hers." The emphasis on separate property in the Muslim marriage gives some idea of how women viewed their relationships with their husbands. Before marriage, a Muslim woman's parents took advantage of their leverage to get as much money as possible from the groom or, if not so much money before marriage, agreement that she would receive a large amount if he

divorced her or died before other heirs took their share of the inheritance. If this contracted amount (the *mu'akkira*, or later amount) was high enough, it would discourage "frivolous" divorce and immediate remarriage, since the man might not have enough left to pay the up-front (*mu'addima*) portion of a dowry for a new bride.

The Muslim wife normally took the furnishings of the household with her in divorce and, as long as they were married, the husband had to support her. By comparison with the penuriousness of the Christians, it was often surprising to see how lavishly some Muslim women spent their husbands' earnings. The husbands may have objected privately, but their stature as males was enhanced in Bulaq by their ability to provide well for their families, and therefore displays of expensive clothing, good furnishings, and sleek well-fed wives were seen as advertisements for Muslim men's skills as providers. The women, meanwhile, were demonstrating to the world that they kept their husbands' attentions.

Christians, by contrast, took pride in their thriftiness. With little possibility of divorce, the couple's possessions belonged to the household rather than to the separate spouses. Spending lavishly only took away from what belonged to the family as a whole. In marriage preparations, Christian couples in Bulaq spent less than the average. A china tea set, which was considered a basic item for a Muslim bride, was not considered necessary for Christians who contented themselves with something of rougher quality. There was no loss of face in being economical, and in fact, a thrifty wife was seen as a person who didn't waste the family's resources. One Christian, in noting the difference in spending, said, "Muslims live by the motto, 'Spend generously all you have in your pocket and the money will come back to you with interest.' Christians say, 'Save the white coin [piaster] for a dark day.'" Christian women were praised when they made money go a long way. Ansaf said that dressing in a slovenly way or dressing her children in hand-me-downs would be showing everyone that a wife was economical. Perhaps this also explained why Christians did not seem as charitable to their neighbors as Muslims.

The issue of divorce was central in shaping gender roles. Several Muslim women remarked to me on how fortunate Christian women were to have such strong restrictions on divorce. They recognized their weak position compared to their husbands.³ Christian men, however, when comparing themselves with Muslim men, saw the advantages of easy divorce in controlling their wives. Christian men felt relatively impotent in arguments with their wives who had no fear of divorce. The ultimate weapon for a Christian husband, exercised rarely, was to threaten conversion to Islam to divorce his wife:

The midwife told us she had been called to the home of a Bulaq Center member one day because the husband and wife had been quarrelling, and the wife had left

the house. The husband claimed he was going to become a Muslim and divorce his wife because she was dirty and the house was always a mess. He said she was bringing up their seven children badly, so they didn't behave properly. The wife was crying and the children were supporting her side of the argument. They said they didn't want to stay with their father because he beat them. The midwife told them it would be very difficult for him to become a Muslim, "for who in the Christian community would marry the children of a Muslim father?" The midwife talked to the father to calm him, and the wife and children reluctantly returned home.

Among Muslims, the relationship of parents to children is also spelled out. Fathers or other, usually paternal, male relatives are expected to have guardianship over children until they reach maturity. Mostly this involves major decisions involving money, but it also concerns important decisions, such as the marriage of children who are not yet able to make those decisions for themselves. Another concept is fosterage or children's needs for day to day nurturing when they are still young. This is the duty and the right of mothers up to the age of 12, in the case of girls, and 10, in the case of boys, or longer if a judge, in the case of divorce, leaves the children with the mother. In that case, the mother may have the care of the girl until marriage and the boy until age 15 when he may decide.

Preventing Defections for Family Reasons

As for Christian families, Church authorities feared any disruptions that could lead to community conflicts or cause some members to convert. One authority writing in the 1960s said that about 5,000 Copts converted to Islam each year for economic advantages or because they wanted to divorce a spouse. As a result, he says, most converts were men between the ages of 20 and 40.⁴ The Office of the Coptic Bishop of Public, Ecumenical, and Social Services claimed a much smaller number, saying that in the countryside of Egypt, no more than 100 to 150 Copts converted to Islam each year and in Cairo, no more than four or five weekly. He also claimed that about 75 percent of those who converted returned to Christianity.⁵ The true number probably lies somewhere between, since it was in the interest of the Church to minimize the numbers, and everyone knew public figures were notoriously unreliable.

Divorce Restrictions⁶

Divorce restrictions prevented most Christians in unhappy marriages from dissolving them. According to the 1960 census, only 0.29 percent of divorced nationals were Christian⁷—an exceedingly low number. These presumably were

Christians who had their marriages annulled by the Church, since those who converted to Islam would have been included in Muslim divorce figures.

The various Christian denominations had different requirements for divorce and annulment. The Catholic Church didn't recognize divorce at all, and the Protestant Church (Presbyterian) allowed divorce for spiritual and physical adultery—"spiritual" meaning conversion to Islam and repudiation of the divine qualities of Christ. Generally speaking, Christian marriages could only be annulled on the grounds of adultery, barrenness in the woman and impotence in the man, or sometimes, in the case of a three-year separation, because of incompatibility.⁸

The Coptic Church had even more strenuous conditions. In 1938, the government required that each community publish its personal-status legal code, which the Coptic Community Council did. This code allowed divorce for nine reasons, including irreconcilable differences, but later the reasons were reduced in 1945 to one—adultery. In 1962, Pope Cyril VI added the additional reason of conversion and, shortly after his enthronement in 1971, Pope Shenouda confirmed this second reason. These restrictions caused considerable difficulty for incompatible couples⁹. A few couples solved the problem by having one member convert to Islam, or more often to another Christian denomination, in order to have their cases fall under the Islamic codes. In the 1970s, the vast majority of Christians in Bulaq were Copts, and consequently they felt divorce was impossible, since a public declaration of adultery or conversion was unthinkable.¹⁰ In all branches of Christianity, divorce was difficult therefore, at the very least requiring elaborate evidence for why the marriage should be dissolved and often taking a great deal of time, effort, and cost to achieve. The Egyptian expression "like a Christian marriage" meant an unbreakable attachment.

A convenient loophole that allowed desperate couples to simplify the process was for one member to convert to another denomination of Christianity. When the two married parties were of different denominations, the case fell under Islamic personal-status codes, and divorce then became a simple matter. However over time, it became increasingly difficult for Christians to convert to another Christian denomination to circumvent divorce laws, since church officials did not look kindly on insincere conversions.

To stop the conversions, Christian denominations united at one point to make it more difficult for individuals to obtain a certificate of church membership until it was certain the conversion was sincere. While it might still have been possible to find a clergyman who would expedite the process for a price, these certificates were becoming harder to obtain. A clergyman in an affluent neighborhood explained:

Once I was called to the police station to answer a complaint filed against me. A man I knew said that I regularly visited his wife, and he wanted an explanation. I was surprised by the accusations because I never visited his wife except when he was home, and I always took my wife with me. I had, it is true, visited them frequently because they had serious marital problems, which I wanted to help resolve. I explained this to the police officer, and he suggested that I simply write out a statement that I visited her as a member of my church. They were indeed a part of my congregation but not formal members of my church, and I didn't see any need to make that distinction. It wasn't until a few months later when the man filed for divorce that I realized the whole episode had been planned to get me to say she was a member of my church so he could get the case decided on the basis of Islamic law.

Strict rules against divorce caused hardship for incompatible Christian couples, just as the ease of divorce caused greater fragility in the marriage bonds of Muslim couples. For some desperate Christians, the only way out was conversion to Islam. This Christian rigidity on divorce almost seemed to encourage conversion and said something important about the Christian community. Although Christians stressed the harmony and stability of the community, they did it at the expense of individuals. By making it difficult to dissolve family units, they seemed to be trying to reduce the conflicts that might arise if family units were being constantly rearranged. Christian divorce rules, in other words, supported community stability but only by subordinating individual desires to the good of the community.

By contrast, Islam, with its simpler divorce provisions, recognized individual frustrations and provided outlets at the possible expense of the community. This seemed, however, to make sense, since there were few inducements for Muslims to leave the community. A community of the majority was able to absorb more disruptions without losing members.

Sanctions against Conversions

There were, of course, reasons other than marriage for Christians to convert to Islam. An important one was to gain perceived economic advantages, including jobs and *zakat* charity money available to poor Muslims through their mosques. Historically of course, many Christians converted to Islam to avoid taxes and for other economic reasons, but anyone—Muslim or Christian—who converted in the 1970s had to have compelling personal reasons, since both groups reserved their harshest sanctions for those who left their communities. The trump card for Islam, although rarely used, was the threat of the death penalty for apostasy (conversion from Islam to another religion). The apostasy law had not been enforced in Egypt up until the 1970s, but as the population

became more conservative, some in the Muslim community began agitating to enforce the apostasy law. If enforced, this law would affect those Christians who had converted to Islam for reasons of divorce and then converted back to Christianity. Whether enforced or not, people knew the law existed and that a death penalty might be enforced in the future.

The following story showing that Muslims could also be affected by conversion was told by a migrant family in Bulaq:

When someone in a Christian family converts to Islam, it puts a blot on the family's reputation that is hard for young, unmarried girls to overcome. The situation is the same if a Muslim converts and joins the Christian community. There was a Muslim in our village in Upper Egypt who converted and became a priest, and all six of his children had difficulty marrying Christians. Of the three girls, the first married the son of her mother's sister who had been taken in by the priest when his parents died. The priest put pressure on him to show his gratitude and marry her. The second girl never married. The third married a boy from an orphanage who had no known family. The three boys found it easier to marry, but still, none of them married girls from the village. One took a girl from the Delta, another took one from Cairo, and the last migrated to a foreign country and married there.

Ansaf commented matter-of-factly: "No one converted in the old days, and if any woman tried to do so, she would be killed. Now it happens more often, but you can be sure it's only people with such serious problems that they're willing to risk the consequences of conversion. Their families will still cut them off as if they are dead."

Stories like the following were common in Bulaq. They showed the intense pressure Christians said they felt to convert to Islam. The storyteller implied that Muslims would go to any length to convert Christians. She didn't know the persons involved and was only repeating what she had heard:

(In answer to a question about whether any poor Christian residents in Bulaq had been known to convert). I don't know any women personally who converted because of their poverty, but I know of one who did to marry. She had managed to finish university (a place thought to be the breeding ground for "love" marriages) and was waiting for her guaranteed job from the government. She was an ugly girl with little chance of marrying, but she had fallen in love with a handsome Muslim mechanic who worked near her house. No one thought her love had much chance of being returned, but he was a religious man and, although he didn't love her, decided to marry her to bring a convert to Islam. She converted when she married him and besides getting the handsome husband, she got a very good government job as well.

Bulaq Conversion Cases

I learned of seven cases of conversion among families of the Bulaq Center. All but one relate to difficulties in the marital relationship:

M.'s husband was married earlier to a woman who decided she wanted a divorce. To do so, she converted to Islam and was granted the divorce. The man then married M. and lived with her for about six months. In the meantime, the first wife decided she wanted her husband back. She convinced him to convert to Islam in order to divorce M. and remarry her. M. returned to her mother's home and bore a son that she had been several months pregnant with when her husband left her. Meanwhile, the divorce case was brought before the judge, and he ruled that the now Muslim husband must make support payments to his Christian ex-wife M. for the care of the child. When he received this news, the vacillating husband decided it might be better financially if he returned to M., but M.'s family refused to let her go back to him.

(This story had different versions depending on whether family members of the woman told the story or her neighbors. It shows how people managed their images.) Um G.'s middle daughter, R., was married to a man from Alexandria who was not related to her. Um G. blames the problems in their marriage on this fact. Her eldest daughter, she notes, was married successfully to her mother's sister's son, and her youngest daughter was engaged to another mother's sister's son. R.'s husband was a taxi driver and, according to the family, a weeping woman got into his car one day and began telling him her problems. In the course of the story, R.'s husband fell in love with her, influenced by "the spell cast over him" by the stranger. He became so obsessed with her that eventually he converted to Islam and married her. His parents rejected him completely and, to show their disapproval, took R. and her three daughters to live with them. But R. was not content to leave things as they were. She went to an expert in removing spells and eventually was successful. Her husband came back and asked for her forgiveness.

At this point, the story diverged into two versions. According to the neighbors, R. argued with her husband, and he left the house in anger. According to her mother and sisters, she took him back, and they were living happily together. However, according to both versions, shortly after their reunion, he had a car accident and died in hospital several days later—a result of another curse put on him by his Muslim wife. After his death, his parents had a quarrel with R. and sent her with her children home to her mother in Bulaq. The Muslim woman claimed he had been married to her and so she received his pension money and his property. R. had to work in a bakery to support her children who were cared for during the day by her mother.

Um G.'s case was known among the neighbors, but the details could not be verified because they involved people who were no longer living. Um G.'s mother had been a Muslim and her father a Christian. Laws prohibited a Muslim woman

from marrying a Christian man, so she converted to Christianity, but her daughter's ambivalence about her background seems to be reflected in her spirit possession (see a later chapter).

We went to visit Um A. but found only her daughter, M., at home chatting with her sister's son who had come for a visit. We were trying to help M. marry, so we asked her what she thought of the idea of marriage to Um F.'s son, and she replied that she would rather not marry at all than marry someone with such a bad reputation. The fact that Um F.'s son even thought he had a chance with such an attractive person suggested a defect of some kind in M. Soon it became apparent that the problem was her brother who had converted to Islam to marry a woman he had fallen in love with. Ansaf explained the issue to me in front of M. and added the usual warning that no Christian would marry her and risk having Muslim cousins for their children. I asked innocently, already knowing the answer, "What about the stigma for a Muslim of having Christian cousins for his children if he marries a Christian woman?" "That's not a problem," they answered, "It's considered good for Muslims to bring Christian women into their families, especially if they convert. It means they've added more Muslims to the population. Muslims might also feel they could convert the Christian cousins so they too would be able to marry more easily." "Where is M.'s brother now, and what about his children?" "We know nothing of him since he went over to Islam." They shake their heads. M. is now 25 and has few prospects of marriage.

Um R. also had a son who converted to Islam and had four children. His situation was one of a catalog of ills that she complained about. She had no idea what had become of him and preferred not to talk about him, although she recounted her other problems in great detail.

L. did not take the name Um F. after her eldest son as was the practice in Bulaq. The social worker before Ansaf wrote in the records that F. was off in the army fighting on the front. The family had no news of him for two years and didn't know whether he was dead or alive. Neighbors told us he converted to Islam to make it easier to work in an Arab oil country. In 1978, when the center's records were updated, L. did not mention F. at all, even though she gave details of the rest of her children.

Um A. and her daughter-in-law D. who lived near her in Shubra used to attend the center's religious meetings fairly regularly until the spring of 1977. Around then, D. fell in love with a Muslim and left her husband and children and converted to Islam to obtain a divorce and marry her lover. Neither she nor Um A. attended meetings after that—Um A. out of shame and D. for obvious reasons. Suddenly D. reappeared in April 1978 at the meeting when "tickets" for Easter gifts were being given to those who regularly attended the religious services. The

usually sympathetic Ansaf spoke harshly to her, demanding to know why she thought she should get a ticket when she only came once a year. Then, turning to me, she said loudly so the rest could hear, “She became a Muslim. How can she expect us to give her a gift?”

After a time, the cases become repetitive because so few people took the extraordinary step of converting. The examples, however, reinforce important points about Christian conversions: (1) that men, whether single or married, were more likely to convert than women and that they converted to divorce their wives, to marry Muslim women, or for economic reasons and (2) that the few women who converted usually did so for the purposes of a “love interest”—never, as far as I am aware, out of conviction. Women might occasionally convert to get out of an unhappy marriage or to take on the religion of their Muslim husbands, in some cases to be able to receive a share of his inheritance.

There were reasons women were less likely to convert than men. The first was that from an early age, they were taught to submit to men’s authority. This was especially true after marriage in their wife-mother roles by which time they had already accepted the fact that women’s lives were likely to be difficult. This didn’t make them shrinking violets—most, in fact, developed strong social personalities as they matured. The second point was that women claimed they felt the consequences of conversion more keenly than men, since they would be cut off from supportive kin, which meant more to them.¹¹ If something happened to the men who supported them, they would need those safety nets to fall back on. Finally, women in general attracted more negative gossip than men for the same behaviors. As a result, they were more likely to accept social norms and marriage partners arranged by their elders.

A Seeming Anomaly

With the centrality of family life in Bulaq, it was somewhat surprising for me to find institutions that cared for orphans and the elderly.¹² Normally relatives felt obligated to step in and care for such people. So the question was “Who were these people and why were there no relatives—even distant ones—taking care of them?”

A study¹³ of orphans and the aged in Egypt in 1981 showed that these institutions were not (except perhaps in minor ways) incompatible with the expectation that families “care for their own.” Both the children and the elderly in this case usually suffered special circumstances that required institutional care. There were two main categories of children: those who were abandoned in public places and those whose situation left no one to care for them. In the latter case, parents might be dead and relatives were too poor to take them in.

Or in other cases, the children were not technically orphans but had perhaps lost one parent (usually a mother) and the other parent had to work during the week and so couldn't care for them. These children normally stayed with relatives on holidays and often left the orphanage when they were able to take care of themselves while a parent, for example, was away at work. Since their family backgrounds were known, they married in the usual way.

The abandoned children were often left as newborns. But increasingly, young children were being left for reasons of poverty or, as staff complained, because their mothers, who were divorced or widowed, wanted to marry men who refused to "raise the children of other men." The norm was that "good" mothers would never give up children and should remain unmarried to raise them, so this was a move that was considered "unnatural."

If there were any indication of religious identity (such as being left at a mosque or church), children of unknown parentage would be assigned to a relevant institution, if possible. Abandoned newborns had a more difficult time than those of known parentage, since they were assumed to be illegitimate and therefore tainted by immorality. They either married others within the institution or, in a few cases, men came asking for women in the orphanages because they knew the dowry would be small and liked the idea that no close relatives would be around to interfere in the lives of the couple. These, of course, were fairly unusual cases.

As for the aged, there were two main types of institutions: free ones usually supported by religious organizations that took in poor, elderly clients with no relatives able to care for them and institutions of a better kind that took in fee-paying clients mostly from the middle classes. In the latter case, the elderly either paid themselves (e.g., from their pensions as retired government employees or other wealth), or their children paid for them. In some cases, the elderly didn't want to live in the cramped urban apartments of their children or preferred being on their own. If adult children paid the fees, they often also had compelling reasons: they didn't have room, were off working all day and couldn't care for incapacitated parents, or were away working in other countries for most of the year. They saw the fee payments as a way of assuming responsibility for their elders even though not in the ideal way of caring for them in their homes. The "more affluent" elderly often spent holidays with their families. Their situation perhaps reflects modest changes in family attitudes toward caring for the elderly—a few older people with means now had choices about how to spend their old age, and some children felt they could adequately fulfill their duties to parents by paying for institutional care. Previously, choices were few and women usually stayed home to care for the aged.

Few people in Bulaq had the means or interest in sending off their children or their elderly to homes. And yet there were cases when elders were incapacitated,

estranged from their children, or had no children to care for them. One of the families in Bulaq had an unusual circumstance that eventually led to institutionalizing a child:

One day, we were called to the house of a Muslim family, where M., the mother, explained that she had a problem. Roughly a decade before, a Christian neighbor had died, leaving a small daughter, S., with no apparent relatives to take her into their home. M., in an act of charity, decided to care for the girl. Unfortunately, as she grew older, she developed a congenital eye disorder that eventually left her blind. M. said that she worried about having a girl of 16 in the house with three adolescent sons and wanted Ansaf's advice on what to do with her. She made it clear she could no longer care for S., and because S. was a Christian, she felt Christians should deal with her problem. All this was said politely, and Ansaf thanked the woman profusely for caring for the girl so long.

After visiting various orphanages, we finally found one that was willing to take S., but only if we paid a monthly sum for the care of the girl. Although the institution was supported by a Christian Church and was supposed to be free for the needy, it was clear the priest saw an opportunity in my presence. Later, after an incident in which S. became pregnant by another resident, we found another orphanage that was better run and didn't ask a fee.

A related issue was adoption, which was banned in Egypt presumably because of Islamic inheritance laws that were mandated for both Muslims and Christians. Christians told me, however, that most Christian families with property skirted these laws and disposed of their properties as they wished. Problems only occurred when disgruntled relatives felt they had been shortchanged and took their grievances to court where they might be able to force the property to be divided by the designated shares of Islamic personal-status law.

Despite rules against formal adoption, families of all classes often took children into their homes as household workers. These children might be related kin or a poor child from their home village. Sometimes infertile couples raised the child of a relative and treated him or her as their own. The Ministry of Social Affairs had a foster-care program that, in the 1970s, handled more than 2,000 children and, in some cases, provided modest monthly payments to families who took them in. But these children who were not biologically related could not legally inherit, except for a small proportion of property that could be designated before the death of the adoptive parents. This ruling applied to both Christians and Muslims.

An administrator in the ministry explained that "it is against the interests of the larger family to give the family name and a share of the property to someone who is a stranger." And, in a moment of unusual candor, she also said "that some prospective foster mothers feign pregnancy with foam inserts

so their relatives don't know and the ministry presents them with a newborn at the appropriate time." The officials then falsified the child's papers to give them legitimate status.

Summary

Observable differences existed in Christian and Muslim households that appeared to be a consequence of their separate personal-status legal codes, especially the provisions related to divorce. The difficulty of divorce for Christians strengthened the husband-wife relation, while the ease of divorce in Islam resulted in more fragile relationships for Muslim couples. In some desperate cases, Christians sought divorce by converting to Islam.

Proselytizing, conversion, and the perils of irrational love marriages were sensitive issues for Christians. The first endangered their institutions if a case was filed against them. All three involved the possible defection of members across lines separating the two faiths. Legal codes helped define these troublesome boundaries but not sufficiently to avoid the defection of some. The direction of that flow for centuries had favored the Muslim community at the expense of Christians. The rules advantaging Muslims were for marriage, divorce, conversion, inheritance, and against proselytizing.

A final point involved the seeming anomaly of orphanages and homes for the aged that seemed to contradict the family orientation of most Egyptians. But in fact, we find that these organizations actually defend the institution of family by dealing with the fallout of problems such as illegitimacy, poverty, death of caregivers, and new circumstances related to the care of children and the elderly.

CHAPTER 13

Resolving Personal Problems

Most members of the Bulaq community managed to live within acceptable community norms but occasionally, personal crises threatened to spill over into the larger community. A religious organization can help in ways discussed earlier, such as sending in a mediator like Ansaf or providing institutions for people—such as orphans and the elderly—whose needs cannot be met through normal family means. Bulaq also had other options for resolving personal problems that relied on religious frameworks and quasi-religious practitioners to refigure problems and make them psychologically more palatable.

Egyptian culture generally stresses group solidarity and loyalty to family, friends, and coreligionists. People usually sought help from these groups first when dealing with problems and kept these connections alive for when they might be needed. The worst-case scenario for family members happened when intimate groups cast them off for serious infractions of behavioral norms. Self-reliance and going it alone were not conditions people considered ideal.¹ A factor that enhanced group feeling was the tendency to blame personal difficulties on outside forces—an evil eye, a negligent government, other religious communities, or nasty neighbors—rather than on oneself or one's group. The blame deflected anger from the in-group and coalesced it around the source of the attack.

Uwais² says that in Bulaq, to succeed and achieve status and recognition, one looks to people for support. Good personal relations and the respect of the public in general are very important. When a person's success, status, or recognition are threatened, he usually thinks in terms of another person being involved and may try to remove the cause.³ This is the time when it's useful to have other outlets for such frustrations.

Spiro talks about the relevance of religious institutions in resolving social conflict: "Although not devised by the actor to resolve conflict, religious beliefs

and ritual may be used for that end. When so used they may not only resolve conflict, but as ‘culturally constituted defenses’ they are consistent with rather than distortions of reality; they comprise culturally sanctioned rather than culturally prohibited behaviors; they protect the individual and his society from the disruptive consequences . . . of his shameful . . . needs and . . . defensive maneuvers.”⁴

Religion as Framework

Restructuring Reality

It has been argued that religious belief diminishes as scientific knowledge increases. If this is the case, Bulaq members had little to compete with their religious beliefs, for few had much formal schooling and what little some had did not emphasize scientific learning. The center’s midwife assumed her clients had no understanding of scientific theories of infection and hygiene, and therefore she couched her messages as much as possible in religious terms, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” to give the ideas support. She knew it was futile to suggest a connection between cleanliness and the causes of illness and death. A widespread belief was that babies were too innocent to spread illness, even when heavy mucous dripped from their noses. When people died, their relatives described their symptoms but gave no label—such as heart attack or stroke—to explain the cause. When I asked what a person died of, the answer was always “God’s will.”

This sense of inevitability, however, didn’t prevent people from consulting doctors or visiting clinics when they were ill. They believed medicines of the right kind could cure a person, but just to make sure, they also tried practitioners and remedies that were not so grounded in “scientific” tradition. And they tended to ask questions that physicians were unable to answer. Why did this illness affect this particular person at this time? Did someone cause the illness out of envy or anger? “Scientific knowledge” could not satisfactorily answer these questions.

Nor did people immediately fall back on “God’s will” or Fate in the active period of a crisis. After the crisis ended, whatever had happened was ascribed to “God’s will” and any actions that people might have taken were also credited to God. Fate, for most in Bulaq, was more about acceptance of what happened after the fact than a reason for inaction.

A middle-class staff member of the center, S., was concerned that her sister’s daughter, A., was refusing all the candidates brought to her as potential spouses. After several tries, the young woman finally agreed to see one candidate for a second date. She, however, behaved so badly during this chaperoned “date” that

he decided to visit his home village first and would then return to see A. two weeks later. This seemed an opportune moment for S. to go to one of the special practitioners in Bulaq who help in such matters. The woman wrote some verses from the Bible on a piece of paper and burnt it, giving us the ashes. S. was told to mix the ashes with water and spread them on a threshold A. would step over daily. This act, the woman said, would ensure that A. would accept the next suitor that asked to marry her. The suitor returned as promised to visit A. but announced that he had decided to marry a girl from the village. A few weeks later, however, A. fell in love with a boy from her church who asked her to marry him and she accepted. Everyone agreed it was the ashes that had done the trick.

Formal education was not an obstacle to this way of thinking. One university-educated woman commented, "I never believed in the evil eye until after my daughter was born. Then I realized that every time someone came to visit, something would happen to her. Usually she became sick, but you remember the time she pulled over the cup of hot tea on herself. That was after some friends had been here." Among the poor, the lack of resources affected their responses to crises. The alternatives to government health services included trying folk remedies recommended by a neighbor or consulting informal practitioners who, for reasonable rates, prescribed cures. Exhausting the possibilities gave caregivers the satisfaction in knowing that they had done everything possible—even "spent money" on the problem—and whatever the final outcome, it had to have been preordained. Neighbors consoled the caregiver with words about the futility of actions when the outcome had already been "written" by God:

We were condoling with the midwife Nargus who had lost her brother a few days before. She had just finished telling us, as is the practice in Bulaq, all the details leading up to his death and stressing especially how she had done everything possible to address his problem. "When I found he had no pulse, the doctor came and said, 'Well, there was nothing more that could have been done for him, God wanted him.'" H., standing nearby, said, "His deeds were an immortality that will make him live forever. If you were to ask those who passed on to come back, they wouldn't do it because life is so good up there." Um F. chimed in, "When I put my son in the ground, I thought the world had come to an end for me. But that night, I dreamt I saw him surrounded with children. I asked why he wasn't with men and told him to come back to me. He said 'no' and that he wanted to stay there, and then I woke up. The next morning, I opened my Bible to read and found written there that heaven is a place of children. Then I was happy because I knew he was in Paradise." H.: "Nargus, I'm sure you will have visions too about your brother telling you that he is happy where he is and grateful for all you've done for him. The dead are with us: it's a new discovery that we can communicate with them. I am sure he will let you know."

We found Nargus weeping in the clinic and stayed with her a while so she wouldn't feel so alone. She said, "I read in the newspaper that people with diabetes often have attacks during hot spells. It made me wonder if my brother had been back at his work in Germany if he would have survived." Ansaf replied, "Everything is planned by God—including the fact that he was here with you and not in Germany—and there's nothing you can do to change things." Nargus: "You are right, a priest who was a friend of my father came to condole with me and told me that a person's birth and death dates are written and can't be changed, so whether my brother was in Egypt or Germany, he would have died that day. The doctor said the same. They wanted to save him, but God wanted him, so there was nothing they could do."

I was upset by the death of the water-carrier's baby—a death that, with reasonable medical help, could have been prevented if we had only been there to take him to a doctor. "Why didn't you bring him to the doctor?" we asked her. She replied, "I had no money, and the clinic was closed." I complained to the priest that the boy had been well the day before and then, by the time the center opened the next morning, he was gone. The priest rebuked me for this point of view, "What God does is always right. Think about the reasons that God may have acted in this case. The boy would have grown up poor, never having enough. And the single mother had so many burdens trying to support him. What kind of life would he have had? It's better God has taken him to live happily in Paradise with Him. And it's better that the burden of his care is lifted from the mother's shoulders."

Still feeling guilty, I talked to a Muslim resident about the baby. He spoke at length, "Everything that happens is for a reason. It may seem bad at first, but later on, the reason becomes apparent. This is the consolation for those who feel the world is made for suffering. One must praise God for both the good and the bad that happens. Think what worse things might have been prevented by this death and be thankful. The proof that there is another world is in the prevalence of injustice in this one. The compensation for those not rewarded in this life comes in the afterlife, as well as in the punishment of those who have much now but are not good people. In the case of this woman, her short-lived son was a happy communication between herself and God, and her lamentation for the child will be a further communication. The baby had no time to sin or do wrong, so he will go straight to Paradise. You should be consoled by that fact."

Although not subscribing to these views, I felt strangely consoled by them. If I felt their soothing effect, it must have helped the mother and her neighbors see the death in a more palatable way. And indeed the next time I saw her, the water-carrier was hustling back and forth to the public faucet as if nothing had happened.

Miracles and Revelations

Miracles and revelations were quasi-religious means by which reality could be reshaped in Bulaq: A woman was telling Ansaf and me, “We are told foreigners don’t believe in miracles, but we know they happen. We see the evidence with our own eyes. And we know they are real because they happen all the time in the Bible and everything there is God’s Word. People here experience revelations in dreams, are cured by miracles, and sometimes even have premonitions of events to come.” The Bible was the model for the way miracles and revelations were seen in Bulaq. Although written in a more classical Arabic than was understood by most people, its messages could be translated into a colloquial Arabic in the short homilies Mme Ansaf and Mme Habib gave in the services at the center. They often read passages in the original before explaining them in the vernacular. This gave the original a certain distance and authority, not to mention the respect that attached to people like Ansaf who could understand the words. This way of presenting the biblical stories blurred the lines between what happened “historically” and the contemporary scene and also between reality and supernatural events. If miracles could happen in the Bible, which was truth, there was no reason they couldn’t happen in Bulaq where conditions were so similar.

Already people were accustomed to blurring the lines between everyday life and supernatural experiences—the evil eye, for example. As far as they were concerned, there was no difference between supernatural and religious events, except perhaps in the venues where they took place. Revelations, miracles, spirit possession, and exorcism all took their cues from biblical examples and, for the most part, were expressed in a biblical idiom. People characteristically personified “good” and “evil” and looked at the way Jesus and his disciples interceded to combat the forces of evil. Little in the nature of crises was a fact of nature—it was almost always attributed to supernatural forces:

In the religious service one day, Ansaf was asking if anyone had experienced miracles. One woman told about a mysterious knock on her door in the middle of the night at a time when she was worried about a problem. When she went to answer it, no one was there. The next morning, she found that a large cross had been drawn on her door and was reassured. Another woman told about having a difficult son who went away to work in Libya. He never sent his mother money although he had a good job there, and when he came home occasionally, he only had “bad words” for her. One time as he was returning to Libya, she asked God in her prayers to make him a better son. Soon after, a letter arrived with money and a note from her son asking her forgiveness for his bad behavior. She felt God had answered her prayers and achieved a miracle by transforming her son. Another woman stood up and told the group that her sister had been dead for 24 hours

once when an angel appeared before her and told her she was not going to die yet. She got up from her death bed and the family rejoiced.

I was having Good Friday dinner with Ansaf's family when a woman told this story. "My sister and I took my son to be baptized in Assiut, and a miracle happened. The baby was thirsty when we arrived, and someone gave him cold lemonade, which immediately gave him diarrhea. It continued for the whole day before his baptism. On the day of the baptism, we went up to a cave in the mountains where a monk was to conduct the service. We were afraid the baby's illness would get worse when they dipped him three times in the icy mountain water. But instead, he was cured by a miracle."

In the religious meeting, a woman asked if she might give a prayer. She prayed for a long time with her voice rising as her emotion increased. Her main point was to thank God for a miracle he performed for her. She had been bleeding continuously, and a doctor told her she would need an operation. Instead, she prayed to God and was cured. A similar case involved a woman who had internal injuries when her house caved in. The bleeding continued for several days until one night Jesus came to her in a dream and put his hand on her stomach, and when she awoke the next day, she was cured.

Um M., as usual, had just had a serious argument with her husband, an ironer who spent most of his income on hashish. This time, he threatened to send her home to her mother. She was sullen and angry but then brightened when she started telling us about the miracle that happened the night before. Angels had come while her son was sleeping and circumcised him. She called him in from the street where he was playing in order to show us. Indeed, at first glance, he did look circumcised, but with closer observation, it just looked as if his foreskin was loose and pulled back. Ansaf and his mother were overjoyed that a miracle had taken place. "Was there a wound or blood?" Ansaf asked. "No, it was all healed by the time I saw it next morning!" We went to visit Um M. a few weeks later and asked about the boy. "The angels undid the miracle," she said sadly. "My neighbors say that happens if you talk too much about a miracle. I shouldn't have told anyone."

People often went back in memory to assign supernatural meaning to past events. One woman told how shortly before her mother had died, she had had a dream that someone in white approached her and demanded her "ticket." When she awoke, she told her relatives that she would die soon, and in fact the next day, she passed on.

The following incident involving me may have been a miracle in the making:

We were sitting in the classroom with the students one day when the janitor came from the other building to get Ansaf because of a problem with one of the staff. I was on my way home, so I left while Ansaf hurried off. I felt a little uneasy, since this staff member had had a heart attack a few months before, but there was no way of contacting anyone over the next two days. When I returned, I immediately asked Ansaf if everything was all right with the person. "Ah, you felt something was wrong. It must have been a premonition that a member of her family died." "But remember I was there when they came for you," I said, trying to cut off any thought that I might have special powers. Ansaf retorted that the janitor had not said anything was wrong, so I must have a special gift, and in the retelling of the story, she continued to give me credit for my "miraculous" premonitions.

One of the women in the family of a member had been crippled since birth and was unable to walk. At one point, Ansaf said Z. could pull herself around holding onto things, but by the time I knew her, she could no longer support her weight. She believed, though, that with the proper medicine, she would be able to walk again. But the doctor Ansaf took her to said it was impossible. Um A. walked into the meeting one day elated because Z. had had a dream where the Virgin took her hand and helped her walk. "It's a sign, God willing, a miracle would come soon and she will walk."

In these two events, people seemed prepared to seek miracles, especially when they were unwilling to accept other explanations. And certainly hope was kept alive by the expectation that nothing was over and everything in the long run came from God. The next example shows the extent to which divine intervention was expected in everyday life:

We were walking along Mansuri Street when we saw the unmistakable hunch-backed figure of I. Her vision is not good, and she only noticed Ansaf as we came up close. "Where are you going, 'Aunt'?" we asked. "Out to find food." (She was one of the few center members who depended on begging). "But God will provide," she added confidently. I motioned to Ansaf that I would give her something, and she winked at me and said, "Well turn around, Aunt, and you will see Jesus." I pressed some money into her hand and she repeated without emotion: "I have seen Jesus." "Aren't you going to thank her?" Ansaf asked. "I said God would provide, didn't I?" she snorted, and then as if to make up for her rudeness, uttered a few perfunctory blessings on me and my family and ambled off. Later we heard her telling someone that she had met Jesus and he had given her coins for her meal.

Miracles are not shaped by single minds only. Sometimes they are a mass phenomenon, such as the sightings at Zeitoun.⁵

Ansaf and I visited the Church of Zeitoun where on the night of April 2, 1968, the Virgin Mary appeared in a glow of light standing on the cupola of the church. Across the street was a garage, now empty, where Muslim mechanics first saw the apparition. One raised his hand and shouted, "Watch out lady! Don't stand there or you'll fall down." All of a sudden, his arm had frozen in the position above his head. People hearing about the vision started coming from all over to see the figure. "Even the governor of Cairo came and saw it, and although he is a Muslim," said Ansaf, "he arranged to have the streets cleaned and the garage emptied to make things look better around the site." Since then, the church had attracted thousands of people who wanted to ask favors of the Virgin or who simply wanted to see her. They bought souvenirs in the church shop or touched pictures of the Virgin on the wall. Christians claim that many Muslims converted after the miracle of Zeitoun, because they believed it was evidence that Christianity was the true faith. The Coptic Patriarch Cyril VI verified the appearance of the Virgin as a miracle on May 4, 1968.

The term "miracle" seems to suggest something singular and out of the ordinary. But as these examples show, "miracles" were not uncommon in Bulaq. They seemed simply a way of reshaping reality into a more acceptable form, giving assurances to people that God was paying attention to their needs. All sorts of reasons were given for the appearance of the Zeitoun Virgin at that particular time, but one of the common ones was that she was showing support for Christians in a time of particular turmoil for them. She appeared for the first time less than a year after Egypt's 1967 defeat by Israel, when large numbers of Muslims were turning to a more rigorous practice of their faith. The Virgin of Zeitoun was both a reflection of a challenged Christian faith and also a demonstration that Christians had their own protectors.

Community Providers

The people of Bulaq had a number of ways of dealing with lingering personal problems. Most believed these problems were inflicted by outside forces and would try first to seek the source of the affliction—perhaps a jealous neighbor—and then neutralize it. In the meantime, relatives, friends, and coreligionists were supposed to offer consolation and support. Sometimes this concentrated attention brought the victim enough reassurance to solve the problem. Often however, problems were chronic with no long-term solution. In such cases, supporters seemed unusually patient and sympathetic, perhaps because they thought of the problem as caused by an outside force and not the victim herself. Another possibility is the one I heard expressed, usually when talking about unruly children: "Each individual is born with certain personality traits, and it's dangerous to the person's spirit to suppress these natural instincts."

An Egyptian psychiatrist, Dr. Muhammad Sha'lan, who had observed both Western and Middle Eastern mental illness, told me that

even schizophrenia takes different forms in the two cultures. In the West, there is more self-blame and turning inward, while the Easterner feels persecuted by an opponent outside of himself. And they are also different in terms of the physical and mental private space where they allow others to intrude. Westerners tend not to involve themselves with strangers or their problems [*such as beggars*]. They feel their private boundaries allow them to ignore these problems. Easterners, on the other hand, draw boundaries around groups rather than individuals. People can be drawn together, even as strangers, if they perceive themselves to be challenged as a group.

He went on to say that this was what one would expect of a largely peasant culture where the narrow band of cultivation next to the Nile forced settled people to seek accommodation with one another.

Reinforcing these assertions was an incident that occurred in the fall of 1977.

As we approached Shinin Street, the dividing line between Bulaq and Qulali, we saw a crowd gathering and went to see what was happening. Angry people were surrounding the cloth-draped body of a woman who had been decapitated when a tram ran over her. Farther down the track, men were returning from an unsuccessful attempt to catch and, according to them, kill the tram driver. A small girl who had witnessed the event was giving the graphic details of how the woman had tried to jump off the tram as it moved through the station without stopping and had caught her black overdress in some iron pilings in the road bed and had been pulled under the car. The driver, unaware of what happened, continued to drive on for a way until a crowd that gathered started smashing the windows of the tram. At that point, the driver fled the car and ran for his life. Eventually the police arrived and managed to restore order in the hour or more before the ambulance arrived. Shortly after the accident, neighbors brought the five children of the dead woman to the scene of the mishap, and her two oldest boys took out their anger by smashing what remained of the tram's windows. To prevent any more damage, the police surrounded the tram and seized the children. Seeing this, the crowd's anger increased again and the police soon found themselves surrounded. Fearing for their lives, they fired shots into the air and retreated to their cars, releasing the children to the mob. This calmed the crowd, and they began to disperse.

The spontaneity with which this crowd gathered and took upon themselves the responsibility of avenging a stranger and then preventing the police from arresting her children illustrates the way people identified with others like themselves. In this case, it was partly the smoldering resentment Bulaq residents felt

for “uncaring” government officials and others who made their lives so difficult. They, however, would have put it differently, as Ansaf pointed out, by saying “it is our *wagib* [duty]” to avenge her and protect her children. In saying that, of course, it would have shown a personal identification with her—as a resident of the quarter or as a similarly oppressed citizen—I wasn’t sure.

Illness as a Plea for Attention⁶

A common way for Bulaq residents to signal their need for comfort was through complaints of illness and vague symptoms. Many afflictions were undoubtedly real, such as rheumatism, respiratory problems, and heart complaints, brought on by the unhealthy conditions in the quarter—the damp, smoky fires used to keep warm, and the constantly burning heaps of garbage. But it was also true that real, as well as made-up, complaints could be expanded or minimized as the need arose. A favorite topic of conversation was illness and the catalogue of medicines an individual used to cure herself. Because the services of the free clinics were erratic, people with resources visited private doctors, many of whom worked in government facilities in the mornings and saw private patients in the afternoons. Shrewd physicians invariably prescribed vitamin pills, cough syrups, and “tonics” of various kinds to satisfy the chronic complaints of the patients. Although relatively inexpensive compared to medications that might have solved their problems, even these simple remedies were too costly for many of the poor. Ansaf frequently stepped in with payments from her own small salary for what seemed to me to be only placebos.

Illness was an accepted excuse for not completing a task, attending a function, or performing other duties. It was also a good excuse to be attending a sick relative or friend. Being ill allowed people to nurse emotional problems without withdrawing from everyday life or deviating far from traditional norms. As long as emotional problems manifested in physical complaints at a low level, they were accepted and left mostly untreated except for the sympathy they elicited from others. Indeed, physical illness was often the best outlet for psychological and emotional problems,⁷ since there were no trained physicians to deal with psychological problems in Bulaq.

Prevention and Informal Practitioners

Although it might seem a contradiction to the belief that external forces were responsible for problems, many in Bulaq believed the best way to avoid problems was to live a blameless life along the lines of models promoted by church and mosque officials. These models of a moral life required carrying out one’s personal obligations, praying regularly, leading a pure life absent of sin, and

behaving well toward others. In theory at least, this kind of life should attract the positive attention of God. If it worked, people would thank God for giving them and members of their family a good life and good health.

Informal Practitioners

If all else failed, there were alternative practitioners in Bulaq and Qulali who solved personal problems not amenable to usual cures. One informal practitioner was a Christian faith healer who dealt with a range of afflictions in Bulaq.

A member of the Bulaq Center staff told us she had been cured of spirit possession by a faith healer, so we sought her out:

After asking around Qulali for a while, we found an elderly shopkeeper who said he thought the faith healer was a woman living about a block away over the shop of Abu A. We found the place and knocked on her door, and soon a heavy-set, white-haired woman greeted us and, without a word of explanation, ushered us into her sitting room. She apparently was used to having strangers call at all hours. The arrangement of Sayyida Antoinette's two-room flat and her dress attested to her middle-class status. She explained that she had been widowed for a number of years but hadn't realized her special gift until one day after her husband's death when she took her pictures of the Virgin Mary and St. George out onto the balcony to air them. Soon her neighbors from downstairs knocked on her door and said that her laundry was dripping on their balcony, and they wanted her to do something about it. She told them she hadn't hung out her laundry that day. When they went to see what was happening, they found that the pictures were "weeping" holy oil. Since that time, she has collected the oil in wads of cotton and sells them to people with special problems. She added that the pictures had been weeping oil for 15 years, and through this oil she has made a number of cures. She showed us two large ledgers with at least 200 testimonials from people who had been cured. On some of the pages, crosses written in oil had mysteriously appeared. The cures ranged from people who walked again after not having walked for a long time to those who were cured of demonic possession. She also said that the Coptic Pope Shenouda acknowledged the authenticity of her miracle in a book on the life and miracles of St. George.

The following examples show the kind of cures Sayyida Antoinette effected among local residents:

(At the home of a Bulaq Center member.) We were visiting a member one day when we noticed crosses on the wall of her room. We asked about them, and both Um M. and her husband told us the story. Um M. had been possessed by a demonic spirit who used to make her fall unconscious on the floor and then would speak out of her mouth. She had heard that Sayyida Antoinette was good

at ridding people of spirits, so she went to see her. Sayyida Antoinette prayed over her for a while but when she went home, the spirit returned. So she went again to Sayyida Antoinette, and this time, Sayyida Antoinette came to her house to pray over her. Um M. said she felt the spirit rise in her blood and then rush out her side. But this time, she insisted that Sayyida Antoinette give her some sign that the spirit was gone for good. Sayyida Antoinette pointed to a small cross written in blood on her head scarf. The next day, two more crosses appeared on the wall over the bed where her older son slept. And a few days later another cross appeared, making three that Um M. was told represented the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. While Um M. was still possessed, her spirit had drawn a picture of Satan on the wall, which she and her husband had painted over. But after she was cured, another picture appeared of a saint. That picture eventually faded so she couldn't show it to us. Several neighbors told us they were skeptical and believed the family had drawn the pictures themselves. But a Coptic priest visited Um M. and told her to ignore the neighbors' comments.

A number of Muslims also sought out Sayyida Antoinette's services, although it was clear from her symbols that she was a Christian practitioner.

(At a visit to Sayyida Antoinette's house.) Three women in lower-class dress entered the room. One had a large cross on a chain around her neck, and another crossed herself as she came into the room where the miraculous pictures were hanging. The third woman was occupied with several young children accompanying the group. We soon learned that the women were neighbors living in the same building. The one with the cross was a Christian and the other two, a married woman and her mother, were Muslims. Until the previous year, a fourth neighbor had been a friend, joining in their activities and "even eating from the same dish with us" said one indignantly. It was this absent neighbor who was the reason for seeking out Sayyida Antoinette. The previous year, the neighbor had offered to buy several appliances for families in the neighborhood when she travelled to the Free Zone in Port Said. Altogether, she collected about LE 2,200⁸ from them to buy washing machines, television sets, and refrigerators. However, she did not return and the neighbors were left with no money and no appliances. For a whole year, they awaited news of the woman, looking everywhere for her and even asking at police stations. Lately however, they received a report from friends that she had been seen in Port Said. They decided they would travel on the following day to find her. After blurting out their story, one finally came to the point. They wanted Sayyida Antoinette's blessing so her *baraka* (special power) would help them catch the woman. "I will grab her by the neck," said the older woman, "and shake her until she gives back the money. I have a feeling we will find her this time, because after I saw you at the previous visit, I had dreams of St. George on a great white horse riding round and round my room." Sayyida Antoinette assured her the dream was a good omen for the success of their trip. She prayed over them and made the sign of the cross by touching each one's

forehead, neck, and wrists with the oil-soaked cotton. The older woman also rubbed the balls on her arthritic legs to relieve her pain. They left in a holiday spirit, feeling assured of success the next day.

There were several reasons Sayyida Antoinette appealed to residents of Bulaq. First, she was known in the area for solving all manner of difficult problems. Second, her unblemished reputation and special skills protected her and her visitors from the gossip of neighbors who take note of the comings and goings of others. Her great advantage was that she tailored her cures to individual needs. By comparison, priests who specialized in possession cases tended to use the same harsh techniques for every case. Sayyida Antoinette used gentle procedures and treated all manner of complicated physical and psychological problems. From her testimonials, it was clear she was sought out by people not only from neighboring quarters but from all classes and parts of the city.

There were other practitioners similar to Sayyida Antoinette but with their own specialties and sources of supernatural powers to solve problems. Most were Christian because of the greater flexibility in that religion to accommodate the supernatural.⁹ Seers were an example of practitioners whose techniques were not approved by Islam. They specialized in answering questions about the unknown—for example, whether a lover was sincere, or about a future event, or something that happened in the past, or other similar matters that caused anxiety in their patients. One teacher in the center, for example, was worried that her fiancé might not love her because he kept putting off their wedding date. She sought a seer who could tell her if there was a problem, but when that didn't work, she tried another person who removed curses from people, thinking that was the problem. Finally, when their relationship improved, she dropped her second visits to these providers.

Another time, money was stolen from the center's office and the girls in the handicraft class chipped in money to go to a seer and find out who had taken it. He asked the youngest of the girls to look in a mirror where he told her she would see the guilty person. The image she saw was indistinct, and the girls never apprehended the culprit. The seer, however, conducted enough mysterious rituals before using the mirror so the outraged girls felt they had gotten their money's worth. The three-day process of finding a seer, visiting him, and going through the rituals released many of their pent-up anxieties over the issue. This, in essence, was the basis of the success of these practitioners who found residents of Bulaq ever eager to believe almost anything they were told. The girls went away from the visit with a visible sense of relief over having tried their best to solve the problem. Then if what was supposed to happen didn't, they simply believed it was God's will.

Ansaf, who evaluated these practitioners from the perspective of church dogma, pointed out the difference between people like Sayyida Antoinette and seers. Sayyida Antoinette relied on religiously charged objects to resolve problems and tended to be modest in her claims, saying she hoped the holy aura would work, but if it did not, it was God's will. She helped people revive their faith through her iconography, and even a pope had endorsed her approach. The seers, on the other hand, openly challenged religious dogma by doing what only God should do, seeing into the future or into the minds of others. What Sayyida Antoinette did was respectable and even compatible with religious belief, while the seers' work was anathema to both Christian and Muslim religious communities, although little was done by officials to prevent people from consulting them.

Faith healing was consistent with the puritanical nature of Christianity. The faith healer had to have a sterling reputation to encourage the visits of her clients who were mostly women. If the problem involved a husband and wife, her "treatments" emphasized solidifying their relationship rather than offering distractions from their marital difficulties. There was none of the "naughtiness" in faith healing that was found in some spirit-possession ceremonies (see the next chapter).

Summary

This chapter showed several ways people in Bulaq dealt with personal problems and described especially the role that beliefs and practitioners played in the process. The remedies varied from refiguring problems in religious or quasi-religious terms, to eliciting sympathy through illness, to visiting practitioners who either solved problems with holy symbols or looked into the unknown for answers to problems that plagued their clients. In the end, relief often came more from exhausting all possibilities before conceding that what happened had, all along, been "written" by God.

CHAPTER 14

Spirit Possession in Christian and Muslim Communities

Spirit possession was arguably the most serious of the emotional and psychological problems that afflicted residents of the quarter. Its often extreme symptoms raised concerns about disruptions in family and community life. With no available “scientific” practitioners to deal with the problem, it was not surprising that religious communities established their own ways of addressing the issue. Noteworthy was the way spirit possession was approached in the two communities, in line with their separate theologies and family issues. Both kinds of “therapies” created the space for community members to support ailing individuals.

Spirit Possession¹

Spirit possession was a common means of expressing unresolved problems in Bulaq.² The overt signs were often extreme behaviors—convulsive movements, cutting oneself, attempting suicide, refusing to, for example, sleep with a husband, or insulting a mother-in-law when a daughter-in-law previously had been compliant. The behavior, as usual, was not seen as coming from the victim himself or herself but from the actions of malevolent spirits. Blaming unseen spirits could be an effective defense for people unwilling to confront sources of their conflict.

Afarit (sing. *‘ifrit*) were spirits³ that inhabited people at all times. In various interpretations, they could be harmless, potentially harmful, or simply mischievous. Since these spirits appeared in both the Bible and the Koran, there were authoritative views of how they afflicted human beings and, in some instances, how they should be treated.

The Christian View of Possession

The Christian view derived from the Bible was that malevolent spirits possessed people who were spiritually weak in their faith. Being possessed was antithetical to a religious life and people had to rid themselves of the spirits to be restored to full membership in the Christian community. Devils in this view fled from a person firm in his or her belief. The solution was to rejuvenate the faith by exorcising the malicious spirits, usually by exposing them to the holy symbols and iconography of the church.

The biblical models for exorcism were the stories of Jesus ridding people of their malicious spirits. The following passages, from among many,⁴ show how the Bible treated evil spirits:

Be alert, be on watch! Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Be firm in your faith and resist him, because you know that your fellow believers in all the world are going through the same kind of sufferings. (I Peter 5:8–9)

Jesus was driving out a demon (from a man) that could not talk; when the demon went out the man began to talk. The crowds were amazed, but some of the people said, "It is Beelzebub, the chief of the demons, who gives him the power to drive them out." . . . "No it is rather by means of God's power that I drive out demons, which proves that the Kingdom of God has already come to you." . . . "When an evil spirit goes out of a man, it travels over dry country looking for a place to rest. If it can't find one, it says to itself, 'I will go back to my house which I just left.' So it goes back and finds the house clean and all fixed up. Then it goes out and brings seven other spirits even worse than itself, and they come and live there. So that man is in worse shape when it is all over than he was in the beginning." (Luke 11:14, 15, 20, 24, 25, 26)

While the afflictions in these examples come from an external force, the second case also suggests that the victim is responsible for creating an environment that attracted demonic spirits in the first place. In neither case, however, does Jesus accept possession as normal or to be tolerated. Once the person is restored to his or her faith, the spirit leaves, but it can return if a strong faith is not sustained.

The Muslim View of Possession

On its side, Islam sees possession as not necessarily incompatible with a religious life. In Sura 72 of the Koran, we find the following:

(In this Sura the spirits are speaking)

11. "There are among us
Some that are righteous,

- And some that are contrary:
We follow divergent paths.
12. "But we think that we
Can by no means frustrate
God throughout the earth,
Nor can we frustrate Him
By flight.
13. "And as for us,
Since we have listened
To the Guidance, we have
Accepted it: and any
Who believes in his Lord
Has no fear, either
Of a short (account)
Or of any injustice
14. "Amongst us are some
That submit their wills
(To God), and some
That swerve from justice.
Now those who submit
Their wills—they have
Sought out (the path)
Of right conduct:
15. "But those who swerve,
They are (but) fuel
For Hell-fire—"

In this view, both humans and spirits, if they are righteous, can worship God.⁵ Spirits however are somewhat unpredictable and there are good ones that become evil and evil ones that cause people serious harm. But for the most part, spirits can be tolerated, especially if placated and kept happy. A Koranic scholar explaining Sura 55:15 suggests that if we take these spirits "to typify the hidden forces and capacities of man, created by God, both their potency and their value would be acknowledged . . . [for we would see that] both the natural man with all his grossness and brittleness and the spiritual forces with all their fineness and clearness must join in the service of God."⁶ The same scholar interpreted Sura 72:6 to warn people against using spirits as an excuse for their weaknesses: "If human beings think that by a resort to some mysterious spirits they can shelter themselves from the struggles and actualities of their own lives, they are sadly mistaken . . . Only such persons do so as do not realize that they will ultimately have to answer at the Judgement-seat of God, whose first outpost is in their own conscience."⁷ This last statement about the human sources of possession was not a view held by many in the lower-class neighborhoods of Bulaq-Qulali,

where people blamed problems of this kind on forces outside themselves. Most also had no direct knowledge of the authoritative links of spirit possession to either Christian or Islamic ideology.

Bulaq Views

Being possessed by a spirit/devil was not uncommon in Bulaq. Possession tended to be viewed as a sickness that elicited sympathy for a possessed person, and any behavior that resulted from possession was usually not held against a person.

People believed that everyone had spirits who accompanied them, one sitting on one shoulder recording the good deeds and another sitting on the opposite shoulder recording the bad deeds. At Judgment Day, these ledgers would be compared and a person would ascend to Heaven/Paradise or descend into Hell depending on the results. Because these spirits were so omnipresent, one had to be on guard against the unexpected moments when evil spirits might jump inside a person. Just as unexpectedly, they might also leave their hosts. When asked how a person came to be possessed, one woman said:

Spirits live mainly in dark places, under stairs, in a cupboard, down a toilet. They see people's vulnerability and enter into them. It can be when a person slips on the stairs, when they are exposed in the toilet, when they are in the dark alone, or when they are physically weak after an illness or childbirth. If a person does something to anger a spirit—for example, she puts hot water down a toilet where they are lurking—they may also jump into her and cause problems. People are especially vulnerable at night when they walk in dark places without protecting themselves. They should always remember to say “bismillah” (in the name of God) if they are Muslim and “ism issalib” (in the name of the cross) if they are Christian.

Although both sexes could be possessed by a spirit, it was women in Bulaq who overwhelmingly suffered from the affliction. This may have been because women had few alternatives to express strong emotions. Men could sublimate frustrations through a variety of outlets—from absorption in religion, to visits to coffee shops, to drugs, or to aggression against members of their households. All these recourses were within the range of behaviors expected of men.

People in Bulaq said spirits possessed Muslims and Christians in ways that evoked different symptoms. Muslim spirits tended to be jealous and demanding, telling the victim to wear special clothes and jewelry and to dance so the spirits would enjoy themselves. Having a spirit was convenient for Muslim women, they said, because husbands had to fork out money to meet the spirits' demands, leaving them too little to divorce and provide a dowry for a new wife.

Christian spirits, on the other hand, caused mainly psychological and physical illnesses in the people they possessed. The victim might not even know whether her illness was physical or produced by a spirit, and attempting to rid herself of the spirit might be one of many remedies she tried.

Observing spirit-induced behaviors as an outsider, I did not see such a clear distinction. Muslims seemed to have just as many physical and psychological problems attributed to spirits as Christians. Christians, though, did not as a rule extort material goods out of their husbands. There would have been little advantage, since their household accounts were joint and by law their husbands couldn't divorce or remarry.

The following case was unusual, because it involved a Christian woman whose spirit was asking her to use "Muslim" practices:

(On a visit.) "This woman, Um G., has a strange story," Ansaf said as we approached her building. "She has two daughters and three sons. One time, she was very sick from bleeding heavily. The doctors said she should have a hysterectomy, which she went ahead and did. Afterwards one night, her husband tried to kill her with an iron pipe while she was sleeping. Fortunately she awoke in time and cried out to the children who came to her aid. Her husband said he had no interest in her any more, since she had become a 'bad woman' now that she couldn't have children. Then he left her and didn't come back again." A neighbor listening to the story corrected Ansaf, "Yes he did come back, and he treats her better now—most of the time—although he is often away working in Libya." Um G. returned from making coffee in another room and I noticed her hands and feet were covered in henna patterns usually applied at weddings. We asked about the henna, "I wear it for my spirit. Every now and then, when I become sad, something happens and I fall to the floor. My spirit speaks out of my mouth and tells me what to do. My daughters heard him telling me to dress like a bride for him with henna on my hands and feet and to cover my head with a white scarf instead of a black one. I have to do what he wants. One time, I went to the doctor to prescribe something for my weak heart. He gave me medicine. [She showed us the bottle on which was written in big letters, 'Poison, take only according to a doctor's prescription.'] The spirit didn't want me to go to the doctor in the first place, so I got even sicker when I took the medicine. Now he wants me to do a *zar* instead, and I know I will have to do one soon to satisfy him."

Um G.'s case was exceptional because of the way she vacillated between Muslim and Christian practice. She presented herself as a Christian in the community and faithfully attended religious services at the center. Her neighbors knew though that her mother converted from Islam to Christianity to marry Um G.'s father—a very unusual act. Her spirit ordered her to wear a white scarf, a color Muslim women wear when they return from the pilgrimage, although a day

later she reverted to a black scarf in the center's service, but a long one that was worn more often, but not exclusively, by Muslims in Bulaq.⁸ Her spirit wanted her to go to a *zar*, considered in Bulaq-Qulali to be a Muslim institution. The *zar*'s aim was to placate rather than rid a person of their spirit, as Christians believed should happen. Um G.'s best friend was Um M., a Muslim who knew about her case and lent a sympathetic ear to her complaints. Most likely, she also gave advice on what steps to take to resolve her problems. People in Bulaq had numerous opportunities to observe treatments used by neighbors for spirit possession and may not have been fully aware of which were appropriate for Muslims or Christians. Ansaf, on the other hand, though not condemning her actions, urged her to go to Father G., who conducted exorcism ceremonies in a nearby church.

Whatever Um G.'s psychological problems from a medical practitioner's point of view, it was clear that possession allowed her certain socially approved outlets. By saying her problems were imposed by an outside force, she mobilized the support of friends who agonized with her over her symptoms, including, among others, the physical problem of her heart condition. If she was wrestling with her affiliation to Muslim or Christian faiths as it appeared, she could test out the responses of family and friends by trying out behaviors associated with one denomination or the other. Her friend Um M. encouraged the Muslim symbols and practices, while Ansaf wanted her to go through the orthodox channels of the church. Um G. could see who was pleased and who was offended by her actions. She also signaled what might help her possession problems: the *zar*. But by selecting the *zar* as a placating ceremony rather than the church exorcism ceremony, she could be opting for a longer-term possession. By leaving all these decisions to the whims of her spirit, she absolved herself of responsibility for her actions.

In essence, spirit possession concretized peoples' problems (while at the same time disguising them) by creating a focal point for concerns, suggesting steps to resolve them, and leaving open the possibility for long-term possession if it served the purposes of the victim. It gave the ill person opportunities to try out various solutions and see what the potential ramifications might be. Best of all, it mobilized sympathy for the victim and spread the burden of support to intimates and practitioners within the community. And not least of all, it channeled deviance into narrow, mostly harmless forms of expression.

Three months later, Um G. still had not resolved how to deal with her spirit. She told us that one night her spirit came to her son in a dream, patted his arm, and told him he must "give lots of good things to his mother"—once again reverting to the Muslim formula. Again, Ansaf urged her to go the acceptable route and have her spirit exorcized.

Institutions to Deal with Possession

When personal problems took the disruptive form of spirit possession, people sought practitioners who specifically dealt with the problem. Once a problem was deemed serious enough to warrant treatment, then the next step was to decide which of the various routes to go. The selection included formal and informal practitioners—those backed by recognized religious authority, those that were quasi-religious in nature, or those that were informal and not recognized by any religious authority.

If the decision was to go to practitioners with the backing of religious authorities, then the main opportunities could be found in mosques and churches.⁹ In certain mosques, there were sheikhs known for specializing in problems of possession. Their approach normally involved talking with a person's spirit and urging it to behave and not cause problems. Relief came mainly from verbalizing the problem and not ridding the person of the spirit.¹⁰ This was consistent with Islamic theory, which did not find possession necessarily incompatible with a religious life. Mosques' sessions were attended by Muslims but not by any Christians I knew.

*Exorcisms*¹¹

Church exorcisms aimed at reviving people's faith so they could resist evil spirits with their stronger inner resources. The revival of faith was largely symbolic. If the person believed in church symbols (and on another level was willing to give up the affliction), then the spirit could be driven out simply by showing it holy symbols. Ostensibly the burden was on the spirit to show that a level of faith had been attained to cast him out. The symbols to which the spirit reacted were holy water, sacramental oil, crosses, incense, pictures of saints, statues of Jesus and Mary, words of religious significance, and so on. The spirit supposedly feared the sacredness of these symbols and on seeing them would shriek and leave his host and be "burnt up." The possessed person writhed in anguish when these symbols were present, showing that exorcism required a painful wresting out of the spirit(s).¹²

Muslims with severe afflictions often attended the Christian exorcism ceremonies.¹³ A reason may have been that getting rid of the spirit, and not just placating it, was possibly a more satisfactory outcome for them.¹⁴ Local Muslims believed Christian symbols were highly effective in eliminating spirits. One noteworthy aspect of Muslim attendance was that the cure, which rid Christians of evil spirits through holy objects and icons, in theory should not have worked for Muslims. In its orthodox form, Islam adamantly opposed such idolatry, so Muslims should not have seen the symbols as possessing supernatural powers. This orthodoxy, however, seemed to matter little to Muslims who attended

exorcism ceremonies. The reasoning of individuals may have been that the spirit was reacting to the symbols and not the host, thus excusing the victim from violating religious orthodoxy. The other possibility is that, as was the case with Christians, the poorly educated Muslims of Bulaq had only limited knowledge of the expectations of their religion.

There was another important distinction implied in the ceremonies of Christians and Muslims. Christians strengthened their faith by acknowledging the divinity of Jesus Christ—a major dividing point between Christianity and Islam. Because Muslims could not be expected to rely on beliefs about divinity to sustain their cures, the priest emphasized more palatable remedies: praying over them and using holy oil, crosses, and pictures, instead of the iconic figures of the Christian Church. The following case shows how little the basic contradictions of her faith affected the cure of the Muslim woman involved:

(We were sitting in the waiting room next to the chapel of a Coptic Church near Bulaq where a priest held exorcism ceremonies several times a week.) A family entered—father, mother, and two daughters, one 14 years old and the other about 20. At first, they seemed perfectly normal as they walked over to the bench where we sat waiting. But almost as soon as she sat down, the younger daughter began to shake convulsively.¹⁵ The older sister wrapped her arms around the girl to prevent her from getting hurt as she jerked back and forth. Soon the younger girl's strength became too much for the sister, and a man came over who was a helper in the church. He held the girl to quiet her while conversing with the spirit who spoke out of her mouth in harsh raspy tones. The older sister whispered to us the story of her possession. The girl, S., was afflicted with 24 spirits who had jumped into her from her mother who, the previous year, had been possessed by 25 spirits. Now the mother only had one left after the rest inhabited her daughter. Although the family was Muslim, they had decided to consult Father G., who was known for his abilities to deal with these problems and because of the potency and destructiveness of the girl's spirits. We could see scars on her wrists where she had cut herself, and according to the sister, she had once jumped off a high cupboard and another time tried to jump out a window.

The church helper held the girl's hand as he talked to the spirit. "Who are you?" The spirit answered, "I am Ibrahim."¹⁶ "How many of you are there?" "There are seven of us." The girl had apparently been losing spirits since the original 24 possessed her. Her convulsions subsided for a minute and she opened her eyes but then returned to the violent seizures, thrashing around and with arms and legs thrusting out randomly in all directions. The mother leaned over to continue the story about her own and S.'s possession with no sign that she was still possessed. She said the demons descended on the house like a plague, "What can we do?" was her attitude. The father reacted sympathetically as a person might with two seriously ill people in his family.

Soon Father G. came out and, noticing the commotion, walked over to the girl. He addressed the spirit, Ibrahim, saying he expected him to behave calmly in the church and not cause problems. We all went into the chapel where, by then, there were 12 possessed people with their accompanying friends and relatives, as well as a few onlookers like us. Father G. painted crosses with holy oil on each person's forehead, neck, and wrists to protect those not already possessed against loose spirits and for those possessed to begin the process of exorcism. Then, he stood at the back of the church and chanted words so rapidly they were indistinguishable. He droned on in a soothing, hypnotic way. Every now and then the girl would interrupt him with convulsive movements and shouts, sometimes trying to tear off the cross around her neck or, in the voice of Ibrahim, shouting insults at the priest. Eventually Father G. strode over to her, grabbed¹⁷ her hair tightly so she couldn't move, and smeared holy oil all over her face while holding his glittering cross a few inches from her eyes. Ibrahim objected loudly to each of these moves but finally shouted that he wanted to go to the picture of the Virgin Mary¹⁸ on the wall at the front of the chapel. The girl walked quickly to the picture, put both hands on it, and began screaming, "I am burning up, I am dying!" Eventually she walked calmly back to her seat with no sign of her former possession. Father G. asked, "Who is speaking now?" "It is Hassan." "How many of you are left?" "Six of us," came the raspy reply.

We went through this procedure for "Ibrahim," "Hassan," and "Nabil," each time with a different picture: the Virgin, Jesus, and St. George. Finally, there were four spirits left, and the voice of "Abdu" was speaking when suddenly the mother, from a pew on the other side of the chapel, began to cry and moan and lie down on the pew. "I must go to her," cried Abdu. "It's my brother Morgan who is in trouble and needs me."¹⁹ Both women went to the pictures and placed their hands on them. The priest at this point directed his attention to the mother, and after a while, Morgan shouted that he would not leave the mother despite all the efforts of the priest with hair pulling, oils, and crosses to dislodge him.

Meanwhile, the girl's spirit was crying out less frequently and I noted a touch of peevishness as she withdrew her hands from the picture and stomped back to her seat. When the priest gave up on "Morgan" and returned to the girl, he asked if another spirit had "burnt up." She, or at least her current active spirit, responded sullenly, "No we are again 24." The priest retorted angrily that he was lying, but the time for the exorcism ceremony was over and he didn't press her further. A helper distributed oil and holy water to people who brought containers, and the priest said they should sprinkle it on themselves several times a day and return for the next service later in the week if they were still having problems.

The girl continued to visit the sessions for several weeks—never totally giving up her spirits—but becoming considerably calmer and more manageable as time went by. Sometimes she would evince total boredom with the proceedings and only give a halfhearted "performance," while on other occasions, she had short bouts of the same frenzied behavior as during her first visit. At one

point when she was shouting insults at the priest, an adult jumped up from the audience and tried to strike her for her disrespect. His neighbor restrained him saying, "She can't help it. She's not responsible. It's the spirit."

All exorcism cases were, of course, not the same, nor did they always follow the same pattern as this case, but in general, they had elements in common. There was a stylized way for a victim to manifest spirit possession in convulsive movements and glazed looks. A mentally handicapped man present on the first day of the girl's treatment did not behave as she did, and so others commented that he was not possessed and could not be cured by Father G. The holy symbols, they said, would always make spirits cry out in the truly possessed. In many ways, the symbols were a litmus test of possession, even though not all spirits immediately left their victims, presumably not until the required level of faith was restored. Another important part of the cure was the priest's laying his hands on the victim. In the Coptic faith, there is sacramental significance to this act that conveys healing or blessing on the recipient, especially when the affliction is caused by the separation of the person's soul from God (i.e., lack of faith):²⁰

A second case referred to Father G. involved a Muslim worker at the Bulaq Center. Her problem was epilepsy, but since the symptoms were somewhat similar to possession, she was told to seek a cure with Father G. A *zar* seemed out of the question, given the severity of her seizures. She went to Father G. and for several months, when she was seizure-free, it seemed she had been cured. Suddenly however, she had a very severe attack, and when she recovered, she again visited Father G. who told her that her spirit had not returned and that all she needed to do was go to a garden to breathe fresh air and pray and she would soon be better again.

A staff member of the Bulaq Center expressed her sorrow at hearing of the recurrence of the attacks and described how the power of prayer had once cured her. I suggested that the woman's problem might be physical and, if so, might be controlled with medicines. Ansaf asked if I could get the medicine for her so the girl "would be convinced of the power of prayer." During later seizures, the woman's mother suggested the spirit was wanting to return to the priest, a seeming contradiction since spirits were supposed to fear priests.

In the final example, we see how possession gave the person a culturally approved means of expressing culturally disapproved behavior:

(In a session with Father G.) A woman became possessed after her first child was born. According to her family, it had been an extremely painful birth, and she was afraid of becoming pregnant again. As a skeptic, I wondered if this might be the source of her problem. Her spirit was claiming to love her so much that he didn't want her to have sexual relations with her husband. She was sitting in

a pew between her husband and sister, with other members of his family sitting nearby. The husband sat with his arm protectively around her and the sister spoke sympathetically to her every now and then. There was no sign of her possession until Father G. grabbed her hair and demanded loudly to know the name of her spirit. She didn't answer at first, but after the priest aggressively forced her mouth open and swabbed her throat with his oil covered finger, the spirit spoke saying he would not tell his name and that he was an extremely strong spirit and would never leave her. Furthermore, he refused to even consider letting her sleep with her husband ever again. The priest tried all his symbols to no avail and the husband was left consoling his frightened, sobbing wife.

If this case is compared with that of S., the runaway wife, in an earlier chapter, we can see some of the advantages of possession. S. refused to sleep with her husband too but managed to antagonize everyone, including her own parents, by returning to their home. Even Ansaf was angry, as were the surrounding neighbors. Her parents-in-law complained about how much they had spent on the dowry and how they had only gotten a stubborn daughter-in-law. Eventually she was forced to return to her angry husband because there was nowhere else to go and because divorce was not an option for Christians.

In the spirit possession case, the problem was similar—a wife unwilling to sleep with her husband. But this time, the “misbehaving” wife was brought sympathetically by her husband and sister to the priest as if to a doctor to relieve a problem that affected them all. She was sympathized with because they saw her affliction as not of her own making but rather imposed on her by the spirit. In that case, family members were united in their concern for the young woman's welfare. In S.'s case, by contrast, her family and her husband's family blamed S. for the problem and argued over how to force her to return.

*The Zar*²¹

Although the Christian exorcism ceremonies often attracted Muslims, the *zar*, from my experience, did not attract Christians. The Christian exorcisms intended to rid victims of their malevolent spirits, while the “dancing *zars*” were designed to placate spirits enough so they would stop causing problems. One form of *zar*, which was closer to an exorcism, occurred when family members killed an animal—usually a sheep—on behalf of the victim and invited relatives and friends to attend the meal while efforts went on to remove the spirit from the victim.²² The high cost of this *zar* prevented it from becoming common in Bulaq, but it was well-known in more affluent classes.

The most vibrant institution attracting large numbers of Muslim residents in Bulaq was the weekly *zar*. Christians occasionally came to watch but not to actively participate. Church officials frowned on *zars*, which they viewed as

pagan rituals rather than a recommended way of expelling spirits. Any Christian attending them for relief from spirits would have been evading the authorized channels of the church. A Coptic Orthodox organization, al-Hayat, in nearby Azbakiya, had as one of its goals “the abolishment of the *zar* and other nonacceptable customs.” The existence of such an organization may have meant the *zar* had wider appeal for Christians than I observed or that al-Hayat had successfully prevented Christians from attending.

As already noted, Islam viewed spirits as both good and bad, so it was not necessary to rid a person of spirits if they could be cajoled back to less-harmful behaviors. Although officially forbidden by Muslim authorities, the *zar* was considered in Bulaq to be a Muslim institution, intended for Muslims and solving their problems in ways appropriate to Muslim needs.

As an observer, it was not always possible to know why people participated in *zars*. One Egyptian writer suggested that *zars* offer a release for Egyptian women who, from childhood on, are taught to be self-denying and in control of their desires so they can serve others: parent, brother, husband, and children. When this suppression becomes too much, they seek relief in the *zar*: “She pulls her hair, beats herself and this is a healthy release to her controlled feelings. In this situation, she is the center of attention and the object of kindness. This satisfies her.”²³ In Bulaq, there were a number of reasons for attending *zars*. Some people clearly went for the pleasure of listening to the music and watching the dancers. Others found relief in the physical exhaustion after an evening of dancing, including the release of sexual tensions that the drumming clearly was meant to excite in the participants. Yet others, of course, went to alleviate the more painful symptoms of their possession. The following illustration gives details of one *zar* and suggests some of the reasons participants attended it:

(At a *zar* held weekly in Qulali.) As we walked in the door of the room rented especially for the *zar* ceremonies, we shook hands with our hostess (the *ma'allima*) and each left ten piasters in her hand. “She is very rich; just look at all her gold jewelry,” whispered Ansaf. We joined those sitting on mats on the floor. The room was small, certainly not more than 25 by 15 feet, and the walls were decorated with drums, goat horns, metal rings, streamers, bloody hand prints, and so on. At the far end of the room, five women were beating out a rhythm on drums, and in an alcove, three men, two with drums and one with castanets, kept time to their beat. Many of the dancers and some of the audience were dressed completely in white—big loose dresses and white head scarves that symbolized virginal purity (reminiscent of the white garments pilgrims wore on the Hajj), showing that they were “brides” to their spirits. One woman had splotches of blood on her dress. Her sisters who had come to “take care” of her were sitting nearby. A younger sister holding a baby said privately to us, “If husbands would only beat their wives, spirits would leave immediately.” Similar comments heard during the

evening showed that not all those present were convinced of spirit possession or at least not convinced that certain people were possessed, though most would have believed in the phenomenon itself.

We asked this young woman, "Why did you come and wear white?" "Because I like to dance and because everyone is supposed to wear white at *zars*." Later she took the position of helper (the one who stays next to the possessed person and supports her if she appears to be nearing collapse). When another sister took over, she returned to dancing with all the frenzied movements of a possessed person. There was nothing to distinguish her from the "truly possessed" except her comments.

A full dance cycle began with drumming. For the first half of this *zar*, a woman drummer stood up and looked around among the possessed to see which ones were responding to her particular beat. They signaled their interest by starting to writhe slowly and letting their heads sink on their chests. Spirits then "took over" the movements of their bodies as their preferred beat intensified. The drummer went to stand over the possessed persons writhing on the ground until the victims rose to their feet and began the convulsive motions of the dance. To show appreciation and keep up the special beat, a victim's helper would give the drummer a handful of coins. Then the drummer moved to the next candidate until she was dancing and soon the floor was full of dancers and the drummer's pocket full of coins.

As each dancer rose to her feet, either she or her helper threw a transparent white scarf loosely over her head, presumably to hide her identity and symbolize that she was at the mercy of her possessing spirit. The drummer kept up a continuous beat throughout the cycle of a single dance, slowly quickening the beat until a climax was reached and the beat stopped abruptly. At that point, the dancers sank to the ground. Throughout the drumming, dancers appeared to be in a trance, but as soon as the dance stopped, they resumed normal conversations as if nothing had happened. Behavior was thus channeled into periods when uninhibited convulsive movements were expected and even such normally disapproved behavior as dancing with a male drummer was allowed. When the beat stopped, behavior returned to normal.

The point of the *zar* was said to be for spirits to enjoy themselves in hopes that if satisfied, they would no longer take out their resentment on those they possessed. Part of the spirits' satisfaction was in seeing their "brides" dressed in a way that pleased them, often in virginal white but not always. Our attention was drawn to two sisters, one dressed in a red satin dress and the other in green satin, with chiffon scarves to match. Both wore considerable amounts of gold jewelry in contrast to the other participants who wore very little jewelry. "They are not poor," noted Ansaf, "maybe middle class." All the others were recognizably lower class. The green sister said she was an employee of the Ministry of Health and lived in another quarter of the city, confirming her middle-class

status. She said she suffered from shortness of breath and frequently felt she was choking (maybe asthma), but the doctors told her there was nothing they could do for her. Her sister dressed in red suggested that the “green” sister was possessed, and so they were visiting the Qulali *zar* near the home of another sister to find out. She had been coming for a few weeks and already felt better. We noticed she danced only occasionally but not with the frenzy of the “red” sister who, as one observer noted, “really is possessed.” The same observer explained that “some people really are possessed and others just pretend to have spirits to get new clothes and gold from their husbands”:

The red sister danced almost every dance and was particularly responsive when one of the male musicians joined the dance. Ansaf was shocked: “If my husband saw me doing what she is doing, having a man touch me like that or make those slithering motions, he would beat me.” The drummers took more time with the red sister, perhaps because she looked more prosperous. A male drummer would seek her out, draw her onto the dance floor and then respond to her slithering motions. Occasionally he would touch her, or she would stagger and fall against him. If he began to dance next to another woman, she would cut in between them.

Between dances at one point, she collapsed on the floor next to us, and Ansaf immediately began asking her questions. We learned that she and her sister attended *zars* without the knowledge of their husbands, whom they told they were visiting relatives or one another. Ansaf found out the red sister had been married seven years and had not yet had children and decided immediately that it was this problem that brought her to the *zar*, even though the woman didn’t say so directly. She felt her suspicions confirmed several weeks later at the *zar* when we heard the red sister negotiating with two of the drummers and the *ma’allima* for a private two-day *zar* to be held for her only. “I had a dream,” she said, “that I drank with a black man and a white man.” (The head of the band was dark-skinned and her favorite drummer was light-skinned). “My husband would kill me if he knew I came to these *zars*, so I want to stay in this room overnight and tell him I am staying with my sister.” The innuendoes were inescapable.

There was no set pattern to the *zar*. Even to say they were placation ceremonies was not completely true. Private *zars* (including the sheep-killing kind) were tailored to the specific needs of an individual who usually expected to be rid of her possession. Because of the expense of private *zars*,²⁴ most possessed Bulaqi Muslim women preferred the inexpensive weekly *zars* or the free “ridding ceremonies” in churches.

Unanswered Questions

A number of questions remain unanswered about the role of spirit possession in community life and the institutions designed to address it. Where, for example, was possessed behavior learned? Why were deviant behaviors so accepted in the ceremonies? Why did possession attract such a high level of attention in both religious communities? What were the consequences of possession that perhaps inspired attendance? We can only speculate on some of these questions.

Possessed behaviors were certainly learned by victims before or soon after becoming possessed. Opportunities to observe possessed behavior were everywhere in Bulaq, among possessed relatives and acquaintances and, of course, in the neighborhood *zars*. Although children were not allowed to attend *zars*, probably because of the admission costs, that didn't stop them from peeking in windows and doors and watching the activities inside. One could see them in the street doing their own imitations of the possessed women with glazed eyes and convulsive movements. At church exorcisms, first-time visitors often sat silently for a time before their spirits manifested abnormal behaviors. A single sitting was enough to learn the sequence of behaviors. In the case of the girl with 24 spirits, she had a full year of watching her mother's possession before her symptoms emerged.

Spirit possession was obviously an outlet for personal frustrations, and it was only because the symptoms were so extreme that there was concern in the community. Both *zars* and exorcisms addressed these concerns with mechanisms to release frustrations in safe ways. Foremost among them was to relax social controls that normally prevented women from expressing their pent-up feelings. Neighborhood *zars*, for example, demarked areas where victims could "misbehave" and avoid negative scrutiny. They reinforced notions that problems came from outside and were not a consequence of any actions by the victims themselves, which in some ways, was a healthy phenomenon. Once a problem was resolved, there were no lasting stains on the victim or her family's reputation. Both *zar* and exorcism also gave support roles to relatives and friends, so the victim was not left alone. Mental health professionals claim that frustrations and depression can be aggravated by an inability to control one's environment and effect changes. With these institutions and specialists, Bulaq residents could initiate actions that made them feel better, even if they didn't always solve the precipitating causes.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter dealing with spirit possession showed how formal and informal institutions in the Christian and Muslim communities addressed the potentially volatile problem of spirit possession. There were essentially no other facilities to deal with long-term emotional problems in Bulaq. Where free government clinics existed, none were equipped to deal with psychological maladies. On the bright side, most people felt possession could be resolved either completely through exorcism or by reducing the symptoms through placation ceremonies.

The “advantage” of spirit possession in framing abnormal behavior was that others tended to sympathize with the victim and offer support. In contrast, bad behavior attributed to the person herself brought blame on her and her family, potentially leading to family members being denied such rewards as good marriages and productive associations that came to people with flawless reputations.

Another significant point about these ways of dealing with spirit possession was that they conformed to the theology and family structures in the two communities. The differing descriptions of spirit possession, its causes, and remedies found in Muslim and Christian religious documents, and personal-status laws that produced tensions in the husband-wife relationship in Muslim couples and virtually indissoluble units in Christian ones, were recognized and addressed in the main institutions for spirit possession. The *zar* encouraged placation of spirits that suited the long-term insecurities of Muslim wives by keeping their husbands spending on them and unable to afford a new marriage, while Christian ceremonies removed destructive spirits as quickly as possible to prevent continuing disruption of their indissoluble family units.

Muslims in Bulaq flocked mainly to informal *zars* and Christians to formal church exorcisms, although some cross-over attendance of Muslims occurred at Christian rites. Muslims, as members of the majority with iron-clad rules against defections, had little to fear from attending the rites of Christians.²⁵ Furthermore, their own institutions did not deal as conclusively or inexpensively in ridding victims of destructive spirits.

The Christian Church officially condoned exorcisms by appointing special priests to conduct them and by recognizing the validity of informal practitioners like Sayyida Antoinette in the previous chapter. The goals of these practitioners coincided with those of the church—to strengthen the faith of individuals and ultimately draw them more tightly into the Christian community. By controlling the process of spirit possession, the church was ostensibly preventing vulnerable Christians from defecting to Islam or causing disruptions in relations between their two communities.

Ceremonies that dealt with possession were not simply oddities of Egyptian life. They reflected the different needs, perceptions, and goals of those who attended them. The existence of two separate ways of dealing with these problems suggested that the religious communities wanted to contain potentially disruptive behavior. Christians, as usual, worked harder than Muslims at containing members within church-approved institutions, since they had the most to lose if their members defected or caused conflicts.

CHAPTER 15

Christian Community in a Muslim Quarter of Cairo

This book has examined how Christians managed their status in Egypt—the strategies they use and the implications of their choices. These questions were addressed at two levels. The first was through a historical review of Christian experiences up to the end of the Sadat period. This part of the story continues in the next chapter with Christian experiences from the Mubarak period to the present.

The second and more detailed part of the study looked at how poor Christians in a largely Muslim quarter of Cairo managed their status in the late 1970s during the Sadat period. The “posthole” study of Bulaq examined strategies poor Christians used to maximize their advantages during an increasingly hostile time. This chapter pulls together the details that were presented separately in previous chapters. Earlier we posed questions about religion in lower-class life. What, for example, caused Christians to connect with dispersed coreligionists in a center that only minimally served their needs? Where did they cross or draw boundaries between themselves and their Muslim neighbors? How did they contain potential conflicts within and between their communities? Was there any difference in the way Muslims and Christians coped with lower-class life in Bulaq? What was the character and emotional content of Muslim-Christian relations? Was religion “the opiate of the masses” as claimed—keeping the poor accepting of their conditions and less interested in changing them? This chapter seeks to answer these and other questions about the effects of religion on lower-class communities.

Religious Community

A main Christian strategy in Bulaq was the establishment of a welfare center to serve the poor of the community. Made possible by the resources and

organization of the Egyptian Episcopal Church and affluent Christians outside Bulaq, the center became the gathering place for the local Christian community. This was not, as we noted, a community in the usual sense of occupying a particular space or having a defined leadership. Rather it was an association of people coming together because of their shared norms and beliefs and because they felt they were treated unfairly compared to the Muslim majority. The boundaries of the community were also not neatly confined to Christian residents of Bulaq but, in instrumental ways, extended to Christians in other social classes who had notions about how poor Christians should conduct their lives so as not to disrupt the equanimity of the larger Christian community in Egypt. This religious community in Bulaq was shaped profoundly by the members' minority status, economic conditions, residential dispersion, and rural origins.

The Bulaq Center

The most essential ingredient for the existence of the community was the Bulaq Center. It provided a place for Christians to meet and incentives to attract their participation. Although a fairly low-key presence in the area, the center nonetheless demonstrated to local populations that poor Christian residents were connected to more powerful benefactors outside the quarter who were committed to their welfare. The charitable activities of the center were seen as nonthreatening to Muslims, being equated for the most part with their mosque programs for the poor. And the center's messages of stability and getting along were reinforced in mosque sermons and by Muslims generally. The center's act of opening most of its activities to Muslim women was a gesture seen as beneficial in both communities, giving them a safe single-sex environment in which to meet. The center in the 1970s, in other words, although a visible presence in Bulaq, was a relatively benign focus for Christian activities.

Fernea says that "stable social organizations are particularly hard to form in Middle Eastern society which tends to be fragmented."¹ One reason is that family bonds tend to be so strong there is little room for competing identifications. Religious community and a place like the Bulaq Center have advantages in this respect, since they overlap with and reinforce the bonds of family, supporting rather than competing with them. Religious precepts can also be conveniently drawn on to bolster the kinds of family ties people want to establish.

An Articulate Communicator of Values

The second essential ingredient of this religious community was the daily presence of Mme Ansaf in Bulaq connecting the membership through her visits and translating the center's sometimes vague moral messages into concrete behaviors people could emulate. She believed in the messages and consistently carried them out and, in so doing, not only implemented the center's implicit goals

but satisfied people's emotional and material needs to the extent her meager resources allowed.

The implicit goals of the Christian community, not appearing in any documents, but recognized by organizers and supporters of the center and implied in Ansaf's activities, were three fold: to create stability within the Christian community, to discourage conversion to Islam, and finally to promote good relations with Muslims. These goals are assumed partly because so many of the center's activities failed to accomplish their stated goals of skill development and education yet seemed to be effectively accomplishing these implicit goals under the guidance of Mme Ansaf.

Ansaf was effective—because of the purity of her motives and her charismatic personality but also because, unusual for Egyptians, she seemed to transcend the class structures that ordinarily saw members of higher classes treating the poor in a patronizing way. Her effectiveness suggests the importance of leadership and role models in sustaining a community based on mutuality of belief and interests. Christian leaders at the national level varied in the degree to which they were able to articulate a moral vision or provide guidance for Christians across the classes, and even in the best of cases, their words hardly penetrated places like Bulaq. Without Mme Ansaf's presence in the streets of Bulaq or conducting religious services at the center, religious messages would simply not have been transmitted to these lower-class Christians in as effective a way.

Creating and Sustaining Boundaries

In aiming to preserve the numerical size of the Christian community and maintain harmonious relations with their Muslim neighbors, it was necessary to be clear about where the two communities could safely interact and where they should be separated. To do this, it was first important to identify the religious affiliation of others. We have seen the myriad ways identification was possible through dress, names, tattoos, accents, and practices. Once a person's identity was known, standard cultural frameworks for relating to others could be applied whether they be obligations to kin, nonkin, or to the grey area of coreligionist.

In sensitive areas—such as marriage—where the mixing of Christians and Muslims was especially threatening to Christians, parents tried to control the movements of their children and the arrangement of their marriages. When all else failed and children married Muslims, the parents cut off relations with them but still could not prevent the repercussions that were felt across extended families.

We described formal ways the two groups were separated by government rules against proselytizing and codes of law with different personal-status implications. Especially provisions involving marriage and divorce led to different tensions in the families of the two religious groups. Marriage and apostasy rules

allowed Muslims to expand their community at the expense of Christians, while the latter used “no divorce” laws as a major means of containing its members.

The area most fraught with danger for the stability of these religious communities was conflicts that arose within and between Christian families and between Christians and Muslims. Although peacemakers were always ready to step in when disputes flared in the street, more serious cases required respected mediators to bring the sides in a controversy together. Ansaf often played this mediating role using a standard negotiating style that was familiar in the community. She also modeled the almost automatic reaction to any sign of unpleasantness between Muslims and Christians with the standard rhetoric about “We all get along—there are no problems between us.”

Finally, emotional and personal problems were common in Bulaq and, in serious cases, needed to be contained before causing further problems in the communities. Chronic complaints about illness were often sufficient to elicit enough sympathy and attention to satisfy people, but if problems were more serious, people often consulted practitioners with the superhuman capacities to seek answers in the past, future, or in other human beings’ minds.

One of the potentially most disruptive complaints was spirit possession. To provide outlets for these frustrations, both communities had formal and informal institutions—in mosques and churches and in *zars* and special practitioners—to deal with the problem. Each dealt with the issue in ways that were consistent with their different theologies and family tensions.

The Role of Religion in Lower-Class Life

The Personal Benefits of Joining a Religious Community

People were unlikely to join a religious community unless it was personally beneficial. Since the Bulaq Center’s activities had so little impact on the skills, incomes, and literacy of members, it was not entirely obvious why people participated in its activities. And yet they did, for a variety of social and emotional reasons that included socializing with other Christians in a relatively tension-free environment, acquiring modest material rewards, becoming part of neighborhood networks, and taking comfort from Ansaf’s visits and ministrations.

The relationships members developed at the center were based on a level of trust that was absent among most casual acquaintances in the quarter—building connections across class, sex, age, and education level. Sometimes these relationships spurred kin-like exchanges that were an important economic asset in Bulaq. Even when relationships were tenuous, they might still prove useful, if thought of in the nature of a bank account waiting to be drawn on when needed. Women built these networks so that, for example, when it came

time to marry their children, they would have a presorted group of candidates from which to choose.

The center's material rewards, modest as they were—stipends, commodities, free medical services, help in finding jobs—were clearly a main attraction. That was obvious from the elevated attendance at the Christian religious services just before gifts were handed out. More economically self-sufficient women attended Bulaq services to practice their faith or seek solace for life's calamities. A less obvious reward was the social approval attached to being known as a “woman of strong faith and traditional values”—one of the nonmaterial ways to gain respect in Bulaq. The potential disadvantage, of course, was that frequent attendance made one visibly a Christian, which was not always an advantage in a quarter consisting mainly of Muslims. Finally, the center provided a carefully controlled environment where Muslims and Christians met in friendly intercourse and could feel good about how well they got along. Much of this, of course, was not explicit, but it was hard to escape these conclusions when observing everyday activities at the center.

Benefits for the Larger Christian Community

The center also provided Christians of different class backgrounds a point of articulation through which resources could flow from more affluent to more vulnerable Christians. Even though these meager resources never so uplifted the poor as to change their condition, they nonetheless suggested, as already noted, a wider community interested in the welfare of Bulaq's Christian poor.

The supporters benefited in two ways. Through Mme Ansaf, they were able to communicate the uplifting messages they felt would strengthen the faith of the poor Christians, while at the same time allowing them to keep tabs on a vulnerable group with the potential to harm larger Christian interests if their conflicts got out of control. The cost to the lower classes of these modest benefits was acceptance of programs they had no part in designing or executing. If they complained, they were told to thank God they received anything at all.

Religion as Conceptual Framework

Geertz argued that religion was not so much a technique for coping with life as it was a way of conceiving of it.² Among Bulaq's lower classes, where normal coping techniques were often unsuccessful, religion did both. It was a mechanism for accessing goods and services and a way of conceiving one's condition in life.

Perhaps the center's greatest contribution to people's well-being was the ready-made framework it provided for making sense of the world and the people's place in it. The religious services gave people goals for living, explained injustices, and counseled patience for those unable to change the course of

events. They offered formulae for correct behaviors and for solving problems and then consolation if the solutions didn't work out—"God's will manifested itself in mysterious ways," they were told. The center rewarded right-thinking and right-behaving individuals. The final reward would, of course, come after death when good people would be compensated for previous privations in their lives.

For migrants especially, these frameworks helped them adjust to urban life by building on familiar religious messages. This was particularly helpful in an environment where, as Geertz describes it, there is a "felt insufficiency of common sense as a total orientation to life."³ The religious framework relieved their mental suffering and offered a world view that seemed eminently logical, while suggesting possibilities for actions and answers to the unknown. People in Bulaq were rarely privy to contradictory world views outside of Islam (which they categorically rejected) to shake their beliefs, and the condition of many on the brink of crisis kept alive a need for the kind of consolation belief systems offered.

Could one say, as the Marxists did, that "religion was the opiate of the masses"? Perhaps "yes," if one meant that religion was a consolation to Christians in Bulaq, allowing them to restructure reality in more positive ways or helping them accept conditions they were unable to change. If what was meant was that it kept them passive and unable to seek solutions to their problems, then the answer was "no." Religion was not an opiate to inaction. The people of Bulaq were exceedingly creative in seeking solutions to ongoing problems. If it meant accepting what happened after the fact, then "yes," religion gave a comforting framework for answering the questions of "Why us and why this result?" Religion obviously did not prevent the poor from, for example, protesting during the bread riots of 1979.⁴

Insights from the Bulaq Study

There were five insights emerging from the Bulaq study with implications for Middle Eastern cultures generally. The first was that among members of the Bulaq Center, and more generally at the low end of the income scale, dire poverty was rarely a constant. Instead, where it existed, poverty tended to depend on a family's position in the life cycle. Couples generally started their married lives with sufficient income because of the marriage contracts arranged by parents before their weddings. Poverty came later with the demands of many children or when family members, such as widows, were left without anyone to support them. At the center, data confirmed this fact—the largest age group attending religious services in order to receive gifts was women with school-age

children, when household resources would be most strained, followed by widows with the same problems of insufficient income.

The second insight was that in the circumstance of poverty and limited income and property, exchanges of services by women were an important asset. This led in Bulaq to a preference for mother's side marriage rather than the patrilineal marriages that were considered in the literature as preferred in the Middle East.

A third insight concerned changes in social status. The main way a lower-class person rose to middle-class status was through completion of university education, when they would qualify for a civil-service job. When that happened, the graduate would marry and seek accommodations in middle-class quarters of Cairo. This shift almost always occurred at the time of marriage and meant a major change in the kinds of apartments graduates sought and in the level of consumption they felt was necessary to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. Almost certainly this had a major impact on the Egyptian economy as graduates increased.

The fourth insight is the example Ansaf provided in her pattern for resolving conflicts in the Bulaq community. This is a pattern that differs from Western styles of negotiating that are based on step-by-step concessions. The Bulaq pattern involves initial agreement to agree, a chance for both sides to express their grievances, generous concessions from both sides, agreement on final terms, and some event, such as coffee drinking, to normalize the relationship. An outside person guarantees that the agreement is carried out. Although the negotiating pattern was common in Bulaq, it was clearly a pattern that extended to national-level politics, including Sadat's perception of his trip to Israel in 1979.

Finally, another point that has not been made in the same way is significant for the study of societies generally. A culture such as Egypt's, emphasizing obligations over rights, is likely to be one that also prefers communal organization over organizations of equal individuals. The tighter the fabric of social units such as families, the more likely personal relations will follow this Egyptian obligation model. The unequal obligation of kin to one another differentiates members' roles so that each person's contribution becomes necessary to the well-being of the others. Societies, by contrast, that homogenize people by treating them all equally will tend to have more fragile attachments and will not be as likely to endure as tightly over time. This latter type of society describes the way many Egyptians saw Western culture—as composed of self-interested individuals unable or unwilling to commit to others in long-term ways.

Summary

This chapter pulls together the details of how Christians in Bulaq formed a “community of shared beliefs” around a social welfare center and its charismatic social worker. It describes how participants managed relations both within the Christian community and with their Muslim neighbors. The chapter shows the benefits affluent supporters of the center gained from providing resources and the costs to the beneficiaries obtaining them. It examined the role played by religion in this lower-class neighborhood as a tool to advance people’s economic and social interests and as a conceptual framework to make sense out of their daily experiences. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of insights the Bulaq study contributes to the literature on Middle Eastern cultures beyond the specific goals of the study.

CHAPTER 16

Christian Experience with National Politics to the Present

An earlier chapter related Christian experience with various political regimes in Egypt after independence in 1952. We left the story at the end of the 1970s during the Sadat regime, when the fieldwork for the intensive study of Bulaq took place. The Sadat period, as noted, was perhaps the darkest moment in modern times for Christians, coming as it did shortly after the disastrous war of 1967 with Israel. At the time, many demoralized Egyptians sought refuge in religious observance after decades of running after the failed ideas of socialism, communism, and Pan-Arab nationalism. The subsequent years saw not only more people turning to Islam but President Sadat encouraging conservative religious elements to counteract the threat he perceived coming from the lingering leftists of Nasser's day. This period culminated in Sadat delegitimizing the head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda III, and banishing him to a monastery where he remained until after Sadat died in 1981. The Christians of Bulaq felt the national-level turmoil in what they perceived as a greater interest in converting them and discriminating against them economically and socially. The story continues in this chapter with the tenure of Hosni Mubarak¹ up until the present day.

When Hosni Mubarak became president, there was not much change for Christians at first until, on January 2, 1985, he reinstated Pope Shenouda as head of the Coptic Orthodox Church and promised to protect Christians in exchange for the pope supporting state policies and suppressing Christian dissent.² As part of their understanding, Pope Shenouda asked Copts to support the president's National Democratic Front Party (NDP) candidates and the reelection of Mubarak. In addition, the pope supported a constitutional amendment he had rejected earlier that stated shari'a should be the principle source of legislation, explaining that it was the application of the law, not the statement of it, that was the problem.³ The perception of Copts being

offered special privileges further “sharpened the separation between Copts and Muslims.”⁴

But despite the fact that Mubarak clamped down on Islamists after Sadat’s assassination—claiming he was indispensable as the only force able to reign in the radicals—sectarian attacks continued, especially in Upper Egypt, and the government did little to hold the perpetrators accountable. Indeed, the local “reconciliation committees” attended by perpetrators and victims often imposed collective punishments, including property seizures, fines, and forcible relocations on the Coptic victims themselves.⁵ For Christians, a problem facing anyone trying to obtain retribution was the need to negotiate with many government actors, including not only the president but also politicians and the security forces.⁶ The president might similarly agree to the construction of a church, while the Interior Ministry would not produce any of the requisite permits. Nonetheless, during much of the Mubarak presidency, the pope remained relatively supportive of government officials and policies to the frustration of many lay Copts who felt he should have more actively pressed their interests.

Several incidents eventually strained the relationship between the pope and the president. They included a sectarian attack on Christian property in the village of Ayat near Cairo in 2004, where security forces were late in responding, and another when a Copt, Max Maximos, was given permission by the Interior Ministry to set up a parallel orthodox church against the strong objections of the pope. Shenouda retaliated by issuing a public complaint to the press, and in 2006, he withheld his support from NDP candidates for the Shura Council.⁷

After he emerged from isolation, Pope Shenouda worked assiduously to concentrate power in his own hands within the church, and he did this mainly by weakening the two bodies—the Holy Synod and the Millet Council—that much earlier had dealt with many aspects of church-state relations. He appointed the members of these institutions and required that he be present whenever important decisions were made. There was increasing discontent within lay Coptic organizations, many of whose members preferred to interact with the state as Egyptian citizens rather than through their church hierarchy and rejected the idea of the pope’s unqualified support for the government in everything it did.⁸ But by this time, the power the laity enjoyed before the reign of Cyril VI had weakened, and Shenouda had taken over the role of speaking for the church. At the same time, American Copts in the Diaspora were becoming more vocal in criticizing the pope for undermining Christian interests in Egypt, including their security and even their long-term viability by supporting the “shameless” policies of the government.⁹ Meanwhile, Pope Shenouda was able to suppress any dissent from within his clergy by bestowing benefits on them and further driving a wedge between the clergy living in ostentatious displays of wealth and normal Copts suffering from the deteriorating economy. In

the resulting vacuum, lay persons within the church, between 1980 and before the Uprising, took a more activist role in the church's expansion of social services, provision of subsidized commodities, and establishment of retreats where Christians could gather away from the rest of society.¹⁰

The Uprising of 2011

For many international audiences, Egyptian Christians first came to their attention at the time of the 2011 Uprising. Then in photos of Tahrir Square, they saw Christians and Muslims praying together and displaying the iconic banners with a cross and crescent against a black background that became potent symbols of the demonstrations, signifying protestors' hopes for religious tolerance. Young revolutionaries¹¹ in particular sought a society where freedom of expression and human rights would become the foundation of a new Egypt, where all people would be treated equally regardless of their beliefs, sex, or economic status.¹² There were those, however, who took exception to these ideals—most glaringly radical Salafists and, as it turned out, elements in the Muslim Brotherhood.

At the time of the Uprising, fissures appeared among the Christian denominations about how to react, and the main churches immediately took different positions on whether or not to participate in the protests. The Coptic Evangelical¹³ Church encouraged its parishioners to protest, and one of its priests, Father Sameh Morris, became actively involved in the demonstrations. The Coptic Catholic Church was neither for nor against the demonstrations. The Coptic Orthodox Church, with its majority of Egyptian Christians, strongly opposed the protests, and Pope Shenouda appeared frequently in the media supporting President Mubarak.¹⁴ Although most of the orthodox clergy heeded his call and refrained from joining the protests, many lay members of the church soon began demonstrating in Tahrir Square. After Mubarak's overthrow, the pope quickly issued a statement supporting the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that had taken over the government and condemned further protests.¹⁵

Guirguis suggests several reasons for the pope's strong support of Mubarak during the Uprising, including fear that an Islamist regime might replace him and the importance of maintaining regime support for the pope's efforts to concentrate his power within the church and as the main spokesperson for the Copts.¹⁶ Shenouda had a well-established relation with Mubarak in return for Coptic political support. He must have assumed, as many did, that the regime would survive, and if not, it was unclear if he could develop similar relations with any incoming regime. Guirguis notes that "the Mubarak era was the worst

of times for Copts, but for the Coptic clergy and Coptic elite, it was the best of times.”¹⁷

President Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011, and Pope Shenouda died a year later in March 2012.¹⁸ He was replaced by Pope Tawadros II, who was enthroned November 18, 2012.¹⁹ Even before his formal inauguration, the new pope said he planned to reverse the explicitly political role of his predecessor: the most important thing is for the church to go back and rearrange the house from the inside. Later he said that one of his priorities was “living with our brothers the Muslims” and “preserving our shared life.” Coptic activists said the statements addressed the demand²⁰ by the Christian laity to have a more direct say in a democratic Egypt rather than always expressing themselves through the pope.²¹

Despite the new pope’s statements about taking a low-key role, he spoke on television a week later accusing the Salafists of destroying the future of the country—an accusation not likely to endear him to many Muslims and one that had the potential of unleashing the wrath of these radicals on the Christian community.

Meanwhile, a positive development for Christians was a meeting called by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, in June 2011. Attending were intellectuals and religious scholars of different backgrounds. The final report²² claimed Al-Azhar support for “the establishment of a modern, democratic and constitutional state” and said the aim of the conference had been to frame a bill of rights that would inform the writing of a new constitution. The group identified the important rights as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion.²³ One of the drafters of the document, Abdel-Moeti Bayoumi, explained that even the Copts on the panel used the phrase “principles of Islamic Shari’a” as the source of Egypt’s legislation, because these principles encompassed the basic values of all three monotheistic religions: freedom, equality, justice, and democracy.²⁴ Although the document received massive acclaim, it did not appear to be used by the committee drafting the 2012 constitution, which was made up disproportionately of conservative Muslims.²⁵

In the interim between the time Mubarak fell and elections for a new president, many of the youth who had been at the forefront of the protests faded into the background, explaining that they were stepping aside to let more experienced people run the government. They described their role as one of “keeping the revolution on track.” But it soon became apparent that these young liberals were the ones who believed most wholeheartedly in the principles of tolerance, equality, human rights, and freedom of expression and religion. The Uprising had succeeded in bringing down the president but had left intact the bureaucratic structures that supported the previous government. As polls showed, the vast majority of the population joined the revolution for economic reasons—for

jobs and better wages—and not so much for the ideals that had inspired the activists. Christians soon saw their own hopes dashed when, in March, May, and September of 2011, several churches were burned.

During SCAF's tenure in the interim period, the economic and security situation in Egypt deteriorated.²⁶ The army was reluctant to act as policemen and many of the much-hated police force abandoned their posts and never came back. Unprosecuted robberies and violence escalated, creating fears among both Christian and Muslim populations. In October 2011, a serious incident occurred where two dozen Christian protestors were killed when military-led security forces shot into the crowd and drove armored cars over the some of the demonstrators. Meanwhile, state television called for honorable Egyptians to defend soldiers from a mob of Christians. Later, SCAF tried to distance itself from the events and the broadcasts, but Christians no longer trusted them.²⁷

In the 2012 election, Muhammad Morsy from the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won the presidential election with 51.7 percent of the vote. Many Christians claimed they voted for Morsy because they recognized that a Muslim-majority country had a right to have a Muslim hold the presidency. They were generally impressed by the Brotherhood's record of social service and health care. Moreover, they believed Morsy's claims that he would form an inclusive government, including appointing a woman²⁸ or a Christian to the vice presidency (he did neither).²⁹ Other Christians who were not so sanguine about a conservative Muslim government or its ability to address the breakdown of law and order and the worsening economy made plans to leave the country.³⁰ The most quoted figure was that more than 100,000 Christians left the country at the time, although that figure is likely exaggerated.³¹ Even if half that number were correct, those who left temporarily or permanently could only have done so if they had the means (and visas), which was not the case for most Bulaq Christians.

During the year of President Morsy's tenure, Christians saw their position eroding as he moved quickly to institute measures more in line with the establishment of an Islamic state. Despite his rhetoric about inclusivity,³² it soon became evident that he was focused on strengthening his own power and that of the Muslim Brotherhood by, for example, appointing conservative Brotherhood governors across the country and assigning Islamists disproportionately to the committee to write the new constitution. Out of one hundred members appointed to the Constitutional Committee in 2012, 66 were Islamists. When liberal members protested the lack of representation and boycotted the meetings, there were only 75 remaining members who attended. The Catholic, Anglican, and Coptic representatives withdrew rather than sign the draft. When the constitution came to a referendum, Muslims were urged to vote for the bill, while most Christians and liberals who voted were against it.

During Morsy's tenure, attacks on Christians and their churches also continued with impunity,³³ including one on the Cairo Cathedral in April 2013. Christians not only felt insecure on the streets where they suffered frequent attacks but saw the government drifting more openly toward becoming an Islamic state.

In June 2013, a grassroots group calling itself Tamarud ("Rebellion"), led by five activists, called for four days of demonstrations culminating in a massive protest on June 30 against the Morsy government. A petition circulated by Tamarud, calling for Morsy's removal from office, claimed to have gathered 22 million signatures. After several days of demonstrations, Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi gave Morsy an ultimatum and a deadline of July 2 to answer the people's demands. When Morsy refused, al-Sisi removed him from office on July 3 and suspended the 2012 constitution. Although critics of the coup (mostly Muslim Brothers and strong advocates of the democratic process) maintained that Morsy had been duly elected and that people should have waited until new elections were held, the general feeling of protestors was that they couldn't wait for an election because of the rate at which Morsy was solidifying his power.

After Morsy was deposed, his supporters staged continuous protests in various parts of Egypt but most prominently at the Rabaa al-Adawiya Mosque in Cairo. Later, this largely peaceful protest turned violent when, on August 14, 2013, the government removed the demonstrators and 638, mostly civilians, were killed and close to 4,000 were wounded. Morsy supporters continued to protest even after the al-Sisi government banned the Muslim Brotherhood and jailed many of its leaders.

Rumors soon circulated on both sides that Western elements had been behind the coup.³⁴ Even before the June protests, Christians in Upper Egypt were warned by radical Muslim clerics to stay away from the protests. In mid-August, "unknown elements" began burning churches and Christian businesses in various parts of Egypt, blaming Christians both for the clearing of the mosque and for the coup, which they presumably supported because of their pope's appearance with al-Sisi at its announcement and, of course, because of their links to the West. Reports said that from 25³⁵ upward to possibly 80 churches were burned, as well as businesses, schools, and properties belonging to Christians in all 27 governorates of Egypt, and several Christians were killed or wounded. The army was slow to respond to the violence—perhaps caught off guard by the sudden destruction—but the al-Sisi government soon clamped down on opposition from every side and most harshly on radical Islamists. Christians began to feel more confident that their issues would be addressed, especially when al-Sisi ordered the "engineering department of the

armed forces to swiftly repair” the Coptic Christian churches that were burnt down or damaged.³⁶

To allay the fears of Egyptians and international groups about the legitimacy of the coup, al-Sisi quickly announced a road map for a return to civilian rule and appointed well-known and respected moderate figures to a new government. His road map set a schedule for appointing a more inclusive committee to rewrite the 2012 constitution, the holding of a referendum on the completed document, and proposed times for elections of a new president and parliament.

The constitutional committee was duly formed to revise Morsy’s 2012 constitution. This time, instead of consisting mainly of Islamists, the committee of 50 included more liberals, women, and Christians representing the Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, and Evangelical faiths. The committee removed a number of the offending passages inserted by Islamists in 2012 and provided more protections for women and citizens of non-Islamic but monotheistic faiths. A provision that particularly pleased Christians was one that stated that church renovation and construction would no longer need the permission of the head of state, a requirement that had caused irritation for decades. A referendum was held on January 14 and 15, 2014, in which roughly a third of eligible voters (the Muslim Brotherhood boycotted the referendum) passed the revised constitution by an overwhelming majority (98 percent). Meanwhile, the interim government continued the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as others including liberals and university professors who expressed even the slightest dismay over government policies. International human rights organizations quickly condemned government prosecutions of reputable journalists and liberals who expressed concern about government abuses.

With approval of the new constitution, Christians felt even more optimism. One of the changes was the matter of legislation. The 2012 constitution under Muhammad Morsy had maintained the reference to the principles of shari’a being the main source of legislation but gave religious scholars at Al-Azhar the power to interpret whether the law conformed. The 2014 constitution continued to maintain shari’a principles as the main source of legislation but gave the power of interpretation to the Supreme Constitutional Court rather than Al-Azhar. The use of the word “principles” under these circumstances of a more neutral arbiter was more acceptable to Christians after concluding with Muslim leaders in the 2011 meetings at Al-Azhar that the two religions shared common principles.

Another provision of the new constitution said that Christians must be properly represented in parliament (along with youth and the handicapped) and that there would be an allocated percentage (not determined) of seats for these groups. Soon Christians were overwhelmingly supporting General al-Sisi and especially his running for president in the new elections. One Christian³⁷

called the reaction a “blind hope” after years of not feeling fully protected by successive governments. Indeed, Christians seemed surprisingly willing to tolerate any level of abuse from the government against Egyptian citizens as long as the main target was Islamists, without realizing the implications for their own rights in the future.

In February 2014, another first occurred when a Coptic woman, Hala Shukrallah, was elected to replace Muhammad ElBaradei as head of the liberal Constitution Party—one of the moderate parties that formed the National Salvation Front. Elections for president were held in May 2014, and General al-Sisi was overwhelmingly elected president by those who went to the polls. But turnout was low and demonstrations and protests soon followed the announcement of the results. Al-Sisi set to work restoring security and implementing a large-scale Suez project that gave the appearance at least of generating more income for the government and creating jobs. When he took steps to reform the subsidy program, there was virtually no protest.³⁸ Nonetheless, human rights abuses continued during his tenure, a matter he claimed was within the jurisdiction of the judicial system and not something he could affect. Also, he put off parliamentary elections to allow himself unbridled authority in his early tenure.

Al-Sisi continued to show public support for Christians and won their gratitude in February 2015 after 21 Coptic workers were beheaded by Islamic State (IS) in Libya. He immediately sent Egyptian planes to bomb IS installations in western Libya and personally and publically offered his condolences to Pope Tawadros II. However, by the late spring and summer of 2015, Christians were beginning to express doubt about his willingness to support their interests.

Summary

During the decades since independence, Egyptian Christians have tended to measure their well-being by the extent to which they felt protected by the state. For them, evidence was of two kinds: first, the president’s assurances that he would protect Christians from violence, and second, that he clamped down on radical Muslims who were the main cause of sectarian tensions for Christians.³⁹ Nasser suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, but his government also undercut advantages Christians had come to rely on under British occupation. Sadat did the reverse—he encouraged conservative Islamic groups and withdrew his support from the Coptic pope. Mubarak again reversed these actions by reinstating the pope and clamping down on radical Muslims.⁴⁰ Morsy took actions that alarmingly seemed aimed at establishing an Islamic state. Finally, al-Sisi, although a devout Muslim himself, clamped down hard on the Muslim Brotherhood (as well as others in the opposition) and gave assurances to the

Christians that they would be protected.⁴¹ Consequently, in 2014, Christians voted overwhelmingly in favor of al-Sisi. But without guarantees against abuses, it was hard to see how Christians would prosper in the long run if the government was not held accountable for its abuses. It would mean Christians would always be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of leaders.

CHAPTER 17

Christian Strategies and Survival in Modern Egypt

In the first chapter, I said this study would, in the words of Geertz, “look for general truths while sifting through special cases.” I did this by looking at national and local ways Christians managed their status in Egypt. The special case of a community of vulnerable Christians in a poor quarter of Cairo in particular allowed us to detail the strategies Christians use to improve their chances of survival under difficult circumstances.

The erosion of Christian numbers in Egypt, from comprising nearly the whole of the population before the Islamic invasion to roughly 10 percent today, suggests why conversion to Islam has become such an existential problem for Christians. The signature traditions of the Coptic Church that emerged from past persecutions—withdrawal, contemplation, and monasticism—still shape options in Egypt today. As if the century-long inroads into their community were not enough, foreign missionaries penetrated Egypt, leading to a proliferation of Christian denominations that further divided the church while leaving the Muslim population largely untouched. The foreigners brought with them a legacy of ideas, including models for social welfare service, that still leave traces in places like Bulaq.

Since independence in 1952 and up to and beyond the Uprising of 2011, Christians experienced high and low points often depending on the quality of the relationship between leaders of the church and the heads of the Egyptian government. Unfortunately, presidents were not always steadfast in their promises to Christians, nor free to act on their behalf when distracted by more pressing self-interests. The Sadat period when the Bulaq study was conducted proved to be one of the most unsettling for Christians in modern times.

The intensive study looked at conditions that made the quarter of Bulaq one of the densest and most derelict of Cairo’s slums and yet attracted Christian migrants to settle there in the midst of a Muslim majority. In the 1970s,

national tensions filtered down to the quarter through Christians from classes with the most to lose if sectarian conflicts broke out in lower-class neighborhoods. The microcosm of the Bulaq Center community in effect provides a window into the influences of British colonialism, Egyptian class structure, sectarian differences, Egyptian culture, and the effects of minority status on daily life. The task of this concluding chapter is to identify “general truths” that come out of this special case of Egyptian Christians—in particular the strategies they used to manage their status.

It should be pointed out that many scholars¹ and theologians argue that there is no inherent incompatibility in Muslims and Christians living in peace together—that the Koran respects religious difference and warns that there is “no compulsion in religion,” in other words that people should not be forced to believe or convert to another religion. This last chapter examines Christian-Muslim relations as they were practiced and not as they could potentially be if religious sources were implemented in their full meaning.

Options for Maximizing Christian Advantage

Christian strategies were not intrinsically good or bad in themselves but depended on the extent to which they fit a particular context at a particular time. Those that were effective at one point might not be effective at another. In addition, Christians of various classes and leadership positions often saw Christian needs differently, even while sometimes agreeing on the same or similar approaches to satisfying them. The Church leadership, for example, might worry about conversions in order to preserve their authority while Christian parents in Bulaq worried more about the immediate consequences of daughters marrying Muslims. Yet both agreed that controls and sanctions were needed to keep the Christian community intact.

The options open to Christians throughout Egyptian history at national and local levels remained much the same, even though employed with varying degrees of success. To simplify the discussion, the strategies described here are subsumed under three headings: visibility versus invisibility, protection versus going it alone, and finally, engagement versus withdrawal. There were, of course, other options and strategies, but these were the most commonly considered.

Option 1: Visibility or Invisibility

A central dilemma for a minority is whether to reveal or conceal the identity of its members—that is, whether to present itself as a visible force to be reckoned with politically and socially or to remain invisible and avoid attracting the attention of the majority. These opposing approaches have different

implications. A group trying to project an image of strength hopes to maintain or augment the size of its membership by, at a minimum, defending its borders to prevent defections. It openly protests real or perceived violations of its interests. In the opposite approach—keeping a low profile—members stress characteristics common to all members of society, such as citizenship, and keep their religious identities personal and private. A strategy stressing visibility takes more effort and leadership than one of merging with the general populace, and at the same time, it risks making the minority a more obvious target for disgruntled members of the majority.

Bulaq Christians managed visibility by displaying or concealing markers of religious identity—tattoos, dress, jewelry, and names, among others. Most of these markers could be concealed with more or less ease in casual encounters. As tensions increased in the late 1970s, identifiers that had been prominently displayed suddenly became difficult to read. Children were given ambiguous names; women wore universal lower-class garb instead of dress with the details of their origins; and they used clothing to hide tattoos and crosses. During the British occupation, Christians commonly gave their children English names, such as Suzanne and Mary. After independence, they gave them Arabized Christian names, such as Milad or Malak, and then increasingly ambiguous names that could be either Muslim or Christian, such as Aziz or Magdi.²

By the late 1970s, it was becoming advantageous for poor Christians to keep a relatively low profile in Bulaq. The visibility that came from joining a Christian welfare center was a mixed blessing—the positive being a demonstrated connection with powerful backers from other classes against the negative of their religious identity becoming known. Visibility was not the intention of Bulaq Christians but rather the trade-off they accepted to obtain benefits. The center softened the edges of visibility by projecting a benign image of charity, by preaching tolerance, and by welcoming Muslims to its programs. The same ambivalence accompanied the social worker Mme Ansaf, whose constant presence advertised the center's existence on the one hand, while on the other, presenting a tolerable image of Christianity through her good works. When tensions escalated further in the 1980s and 1990s, Bulaq Christians felt a heightened sense that they were targets of Muslim efforts to convert them, partly because of their greater visibility (see Epilogue). As long as the center remained a visible presence in Bulaq, it precluded the “invisibility” option for all but those Christians who kept their distance from its activities.

Visibility produced similarly mixed results at the national level, as the following examples show. The first occurred in the late 1970s when Pope Shenouda became increasingly outspoken in public about government policies and Sadat himself. Sadat found this intolerable and withdrew the pope's credentials as head of the Coptic Orthodox Church and forced him into exile at the

monastery of Wadi Natroun. The pope's four years in exile (1981–85) were among the few periods in modern times when the Coptic leadership assumed a low profile in national politics.

When restored to his position under President Mubarak, Pope Shenouda emerged in a less visible public role, giving unquestioning support to Mubarak and suppressing any dissent from within the Coptic community against government policies. He turned instead to consolidating his own power within the church by, among other actions, promoting a clergy that supported his views. In so doing, he became the spokesperson through which all major communications of the Coptic Church passed to the outside world.

The second example occurred when protests broke out in 2011. The pope made good on his promises to President Mubarak by ordering Copts not to become involved, and while most of the coopted clergy complied, many ordinary Copts disregarded his orders and joined the protests. What Pope Shenouda intended as a show of support for Mubarak suddenly backfired when lay Copts along with Evangelical Christians (whose leaders were supportive of the Uprising) became visible praying alongside Muslims in Tahrir Square.³ The positive response of the international press to these signs of tolerance encouraged Christians to express their grievances more openly.⁴ It is possible, however, that their visibility in Tahrir Square led to retaliatory actions such as the Imbaba church burning on March 7, 2011, when there was no government response to the incident.

The third example occurred in October 2011 when, emboldened by their visible role in the Uprising⁵ and intending to be seen, a group calling itself the Maspero Youth Union and the Free Copts movement staged a demonstration near the television and radio station in Cairo to protest the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt⁶ and the lack of Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) protection. Army and security forces, along with “thugs,” attacked them, leaving 28, mostly Christians, dead and 212 wounded.⁷ Some claimed that a saint appeared above the crowd and soon after, there was a sighting of the Virgin in Alexandria.⁸ Some Christians claimed this Maspero affair was not just Christians protesting the destruction of a church or lack of security but a growing frustration with the pope for not pressing Christian issues more actively and for his uncritical support of the ousted Mubarak.⁹

A fourth example occurred under the reign of the new Pope Tawadros, who replaced Pope Shenouda¹⁰ in November 2012. As presidential elections drew near in May and June of 2012, the new climate of openness encouraged a Christian businessman, Naguib Sawiris, to form the Free Egyptian Party and run for president. The party won few votes, but his prominent role in the elections and the way he conducted himself were seen by some as a positive demonstration of how Christians might engage more openly in politics. However, after the

election, Sawiris, like many businessmen, fled the country to escape arrest for seemingly trumped-up charges against him.

Finally, as already reported, the regime of Muhammad Morsy of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party proved a setback for Christians when Morsy began consolidating his power and taking steps to make Egypt a more Islamic state. A year later in June 2013 after massive demonstrations calling for his overthrow, Morsy was removed by his defense minister, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Standing with al-Sisi on the stage as he announced the overthrow were prominent representatives from various sectors of society, including the Coptic Pope Tawadros.

Again as in the Maspero case, national visibility did not serve Christians well. Soon after the pope's appearance with al-Sisi, "unknown" elements destroyed Christian properties across Egypt. Although no suspects were confirmed, most Egyptians believed the culprits were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood protesting the removal of Morsy (although the Muslim Brotherhood denied it). One theory was that the destruction was revenge for the pope's visible support of the coup and not, unimportantly, because Christians were associated with international groups that conspiracy theorists blamed for most crises in Egypt.¹¹ The al-Sisi government used the destruction of Christian properties to paint the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists, and before long, the Coptic Church was reiterating this version of events, officially praising security forces for fighting "terrorism" and blaming the foreign press for misrepresenting what had happened.¹² In a show of defiance, Pope Tawadros said, "You can burn down our churches and we will pray in mosques; you can burn down the mosques and we will pray in the street."

These examples show the mixed effect of national visibility. Almost invariably when Christian leaders or members of the Christian community became too visible, they are targeted by opposition groups, especially during times of sectarian tension. It would be easy to blame the government entirely for a lack of protection, but Christian officials must also share the blame for giving a religious cast to almost any issue and, during the Mubarak presidency, identifying closely with the discredited elites of the old regime. The ostentatious displays of wealth by church officials were similarly not appreciated in a country where 26 percent (official figures) to roughly 40 percent of the people fell below the poverty line. By 2011, many Egyptians felt the Coptic Church and its officials had come to resemble the very government that had provoked the Uprising in the first place.

With the exception of the pope's exile in Wadi Natroun and his emergence in a more quiescent role with regard to the state, the alternative strategy of maintaining a low profile was rarely used by Coptic officials in the last half century. It seemed contrary to the nature of church leadership to downplay

religious identity and promote a “citizen-first” approach that many lay Christians preferred. Sedra¹³ describes the two common discourses of Copts as the “national unity discourse where Copts promote themselves as an integral part of Egyptian society” and the “persecution discourse” where they see an unmitigated animosity between Christians and Muslims. He attributes the origins of the first discourse to rich landowning Copts in the nineteenth century and the second to the actions of the church in maintaining a separate Christian identity.

One strategy with potential to neutralize some negative effects of visibility was ecumenicalism¹⁴ as in Muslim-Christian demonstrations in Tahrir Square, inclusive political parties as in the case of Sawiris, or joint meetings at Al-Azhar to set guidelines for a democratic transition. These self-conscious efforts at showing unity, however, produced few long-term results in reducing the negative impacts of Christian visibility. Growing fundamentalism within both Christian and Muslim communities and a legacy of popes reinvigorating the public face of Christianity made it almost impossible to overlook religious divides during the last several decades or to meld Christian concerns entirely with majority concerns. Shenoda says that, in fact, Christians want to be seen “not simply as members of Egyptian society but as Christian members of Egyptian society.”¹⁵ This view straddles the possibility of being wholly visible or invisible, since on the one hand, they want to be treated like others, while on the other, they want to reserve their right to be different.

Option 2: Seeking Protection or Going It Alone

A second major option for Christians was whether to seek powerful protectors or work out ways of coping with minority status on their own. If they chose protectors, then the question was who could they count on? During the British occupation, Christian identity was an advantage and not the liability it became after independence or after 1967 during the Islamic revival. Egyptian Christians from missionary-inspired denominations often took advantage of connections to churches abroad to suggest potentially powerful supporters. After independence when nationalist sentiments strengthened, they reverted to claiming indigenous identity by calling themselves Coptic Evangelicals, Coptic Catholics, and so on. The growing Coptic Diaspora in the United States in the last half-century strongly supported local Copts by denouncing Sadat’s policies affecting Christians and by financing radio and TV stations with Christian programming. Their criticisms during a Sadat visit to the United States contributed significantly to the break in relations between Sadat and the pope. International human rights organizations also frequently pleaded the cases of abused Christians. But while this financial and vocal support was helpful, outsiders in fact could do little to protect Christians in Egypt, and frequently they

unintentionally aggravated their situation by giving credibility to government claims of foreign interference in Egypt.

Seeking protection in high places within Egypt had mixed results.¹⁶ In every case from Nasser through Muhammad Morsy, and now it seems al-Sisi, leaders made promises to Christian officials they did not keep. Christians wanted assurances of protection, concrete evidence the government would step in to quell sectarian disturbances, and in the best of all cases, suppress radical Muslim groups that Christians saw as their main enemies. In several instances when Christians became too closely identified with officials (e.g., Mubarak and al-Sisi) or too strident in their public criticism of officials (e.g., Sadat), there was a backlash that affected church leaders as well as ordinary Christians. Unfortunately, these politicians' interests were not always aligned with Christian interests, and often they found an advantage in promoting policies that, even if not intended to do so, had a negative effect on Christians. When Sadat found it was more useful to support Islamic movements, he quickly set Christian interests aside. After Sadat's assassination, Mubarak's suppression of Muslim radicals, although again not intended as a pro-Christian measure, prompted better relations with the church. Minorities with limited numbers and power are rarely a top priority for politicians.

After the 2011 Uprising, security deteriorated under the military leadership (SCAF) and all Egyptians suffered, although Christians more so because of the absence of any authority to quell sectarian incidents. When Muhammad Morsy became president and began promoting Islamic values, Christians again felt abandoned, although in public, Morsy reassured them of his support. After the 2013 coup and a rocky start with the destruction of their properties, Christians unconditionally threw their support behind al-Sisi when he clamped down viciously on the Muslim Brotherhood and rebuilt some of the churches that were burnt in the aftermath of Morsy's removal. Even though international human rights organizations berated the al-Sisi government for unprecedented human rights abuses, Christians' early support for him did not waver. They felt he would meet their core demands: to protect Christians, suppress Muslim radicals, and maintain increased security.

Despite the Christians' early satisfaction with al-Sisi's leadership, history suggests that seeking protection from authoritarian leaders may not be the most reliable way for a minority to protect its interests in the long run. Short-term protection is also not without cost in dependence and submission. Once Christians tie their fate to a protector—as in the case of Mubarak and al-Sisi—the bargain they make is unquestioning support of the man, his policies, and his candidates. What would happen, for example, if al-Sisi decided to reassert his Islamic credentials or if the Egyptian majority turned against him when he failed to resolve the economic and security problems that plague the country?

Would he have to make significant concessions to the majority and to the Muslim Brotherhood? Would Christians suffer the consequences of these adjustments and their close links to his government? For these and other reasons, many lay Christians prefer less visibility and less reliance on specific government protectors. The counterargument is, of course, that when church leaders have access at the highest levels, there is a greater likelihood of their interests attracting attention. Even Christians who prefer to act as individual citizens would probably still want representation on groups such as constitution-writing committees, the parliament, and other venues where policies affecting their welfare are debated. One explanation for why Christian leaders relied so heavily on presidents as protectors despite their poor track record was that no other Egyptian possessed comparable power. Since independence, power has been so concentrated in heads of state that Christians have few alternatives when seeking human protection.

But what about Christians in Bulaq who only indirectly feel the fallout of relations between church leaders and government officials? What kinds of protection do they seek? As we have seen, they look for protection of a more immediate and personal kind by, for example, connecting with the Bulaq Center and Mme Ansaf and giving up the advantages of invisibility for the psychological protections the center offered.

But the Bulaq Christians were not content with the limited protections of the center or with what their national church leaders could organize. Instead, they sought protection of a higher kind. They claimed, for example, that the appearance of the Virgin at the Church of Zeitoun came at a discouraging time for Egypt in 1968—as the Islamic revival was getting under way—to show that Christianity was “the true religion.”¹⁷ For them, the greatest protector was, of course, God and they constantly sought his interventions in the superhuman power of local practitioners, in everyday miracles, in exorcisms, and in the church’s holy symbols. On an individual level, they believed in the power of prayer, in the rewards of a moral life, and in the acceptance of life’s crises as “written”—all conventional ways of attracting divine protection.

Bulaq Christians did not show any inclination to try “the go-it-alone option” and continued to seek to attract supernatural forces and persons to protect them despite the less-than-perfect record of both kinds of protection.

Option 3: Engagement or Withdrawal

The final option discussed here involves the choice for Christians between engaging Muslims on neutral grounds or withdrawing into communities where they can better control their relations with Muslims. The withdrawal approach attempts to shore up religious faith to withstand assaults from the

outside—much in the way exorcisms worked to fend off spirits. The danger was that it might marginalize a community even further. The converse, neutral engagement, emphasizes common identities such as citizenship, class, or geographical location instead of religion as primary identifiers.¹⁸

At critical points in their history, Christians at both national and local levels chose the option of withdrawal to focus on the internal workings of their own communities and prevent negative attention from the majority. In Bulaq, it meant providing a safe place for Christians to gather and practice their religion. It meant establishing community norms and rewarding those who conformed or sanctioning those who didn't. It meant defending community boundaries against defections with such potent mechanisms as arranged marriages, prohibitions against divorce, and sanctions that cut people off from their families and the community. It meant ensuring that correct messages were communicated through people like Mme Ansaf or the pope endorsing the "truth" of miracles performed by practitioners like Sayyida Antoinette. It meant containing potentially dangerous conditions such as spirit possession within church-approved exorcism ceremonies. Finally, it meant ensuring that any necessary interactions between Christians and Muslims were conducted in a harmonious way through messages about correct behavior. The Christian effort in Bulaq shows the substantial resources required to create and maintain a bounded community—one that is porous enough to allow in outside assistance while containing behavior that might prove a liability from getting out. These mechanisms are described in detail in the text and will not be repeated here.

At the national level as Islamists became more aggressive in the 1970s and Sadat was quarreling with the pope, withdrawal from active politics may have seemed an expedient strategy for Christians. When Pope Shenouda emerged again in 1985, he went further in isolating the Coptic community by "establishing an alternative social life strictly for Copts . . . [*in an effort*] to exert more control over them."¹⁹ This alternative society provided members with comprehensive services, holiday retreats, and just about any facility Christians needed within monasteries and other Christian sites.²⁰ This "walling off" of Christians created a form of separateness and temporary (weekend and holiday) invisibility from the Muslim majority, thereby reducing opportunities for clashes, even while any actions of their pope became more visible as the imperfect reminder of Christianity. Muslims looking at the church from the outside saw only the ostentatious displays of wealth in church buildings, retreats, and clerical life. By isolating themselves, Christians in certain ways were becoming even more open to targeting by Islamists.²¹

A further deterrent to any assimilation of Christians into the mainstream was the church's strong defense of community boundaries against the perceived threat of defections. The Coptic Church historically took a position against²²

the separation of church and state, despite the private desire of many Copts to make religion a private matter. Another significant hurdle to treating citizens equally was personal-status laws that required Egyptians to follow their own sets of religious legislation. The constitutional requirement of equality under the law was, in fact, impossible without a uniform civil law that applied to all citizens. The church strongly opposed such laws, fearing they would be based on Islam and cause further inroads into the Christian community. The personal-status laws with the greatest impact in delineating boundaries were of course the relative ease of divorce for Muslim men and the virtual impossibility of divorce for Christians. The Coptic laity's main demand of Pope Tawadros II was that he return to the nine conditions for divorce that existed prior to 1938 and thus release the thousands of Copts who lived in the limbo of not being able to divorce or remarry. Many Copts urged consideration of a civil law for marriage and divorce that would provide a more level playing field for Muslims and Christians.

A hypothetical opposite of the withdrawal strategy was for Copts to engage as equal citizens in an inclusive society.²³ Once again, this has not been a widely utilized option except in a small stratum of society—those living in affluent suburbs—who downplayed religious identity in favor of economic and social factors.²⁴ Even they, however, found it impossible to escape the legal codes and deep-seated social expectations that made it hard to downplay or disown religion entirely.

Is There Potential in Egypt to Reduce Religious Intolerance?

One unknown is the extent to which religious tolerance is possible in Egypt today or whether intolerance will only continue to grow. In the early 1970s, the expression “We are all people of the book” was a way Egyptians expressed their similarities. Now one rarely hears the expression. What has perhaps replaced it for a minority of liberals and youth activists is the call for a “secular”²⁵ government. Many claimed²⁶ that it was youth who were the main ones praying in Tahrir Square with Christians and chanting slogans about “all being one hand” and that they are the same ones calling for women’s rights, human rights, and better wages for workers. Listening to them gives some hope for a more inclusive Egypt, especially when compared with the tired clichés and empty rhetoric of many of their elders. But before attributing these attitudes entirely to the younger generation, it is important to remember the cases where youth rebelling against the moderation of their elders played a major role in forming radical wings of Islamist groups or took part in random violence as “thugs” at soccer matches and on the streets of Cairo. It is unclear which of these tendencies will be the wave of the future. Will Egypt have to wait until the old bureaucrats are

gone to achieve religious tolerance? Or will we see more radical religious elements coming to power in the next generation? Where will Christians stand if either of these tendencies prevails? Will their church authorities allow them to be drawn into an equal citizenry and give up the legal statutes of the laws that divide them? Or will they keep the mechanisms of separation alive and rely on political leaders not always sympathetic to their interests?

Final Word

This chapter has described the strategies Egyptian Christians used to manage their status over the course of recent history. Foremost among the options was whether to present a visible Christian presence or to conceal religious identity. A second option was to seek powerful protectors in exchange for submission and support. In the final major option, Christians created controlled spaces where Christians could withdraw at least part of the time from all but necessary interactions with the majority. These options and their reverse were interrelated and overlapping and often employed simultaneously at different levels of the Christian community. The example of the inward focus on community controls among Christians in Bulaq was fully compatible with the visibility that church leaders sought in national politics. What was noteworthy was that strategies appropriate at certain times at the national level were not always those that were appropriate at the local level. In other words, descriptions of Christian experience at the national level do not always fully describe the experience of all Christians in Egypt.

Until it is no longer necessary to identify people by their race, gender, or religious beliefs, these labels are likely to remain significant. From this study, it seems clear that Christians and Muslims continue to define many of their main interests in terms of religion. Until such barriers as legal and family differences no longer divide them, they are likely to identify themselves first by religion and only second by their common citizenship. To the extent that this separation continues, they open themselves to becoming targets of one another when tensions occur.

Epilogue

I left Egypt in 1981 and, although I returned for short visits almost every year until the present, it became increasingly difficult to track events closely as time went by. This short epilogue describes events during this period as I came to know them from Mme Ansaf, her family, and people who previously worked at the center.

While I was still visiting the center in the late 1970s, government officials appeared in Bulaq going door to door to record the owners of properties and the names of members of each household. Suspicious as always of government motives, residents downplayed the number of members in their household, especially the income earners who they feared might be subject to taxes. When they discovered that the point of the survey was to register residents for new apartments the government was building out by the airport, some tried to add names of family members to become eligible for bigger apartments, but it was too late. They asked themselves why, all of a sudden, the government would build new housing for them when it had paid so little attention to the quarter before. Rumors circulated until they settled on the most likely scenario that the government wanted to develop the land in Bulaq. Officials confirmed privately to me that the government had decided to build a cultural center with concert halls, museums, and other attractions for tourists in this prime location near the Nile, close to major hotels, tourists, and the main railway station.¹ Ultimately, the plans were never realized and most of the razed areas became parking lots. But these events left owners and renters in Bulaq fearful that the government might take over more of the quarter someday.

During one of my last visits to Bulaq before leaving Egypt, Ansaf and I took a taxi out to see some of the families who had moved to the new apartments. Block after block of identical Soviet-style apartments stretched across a large desert area. The buildings were painted a uniform pale yellow, but the areas between them still looked like construction sites with a morass of standing water from broken water pipes alternating with dirt areas from which dust devils skittered across the open spaces. On the edges of the development, vendors sold tired-looking produce and soft drinks at outrageous prices, because they

“had been brought from so far away.” Taxis were the main transportation other than infrequent and overcrowded buses that took easily an hour with stops to reach the parts of Bulaq where many inhabitants once lived and worked.

The buildings were all constructed to the same pattern with central stairways leading to the roof and apartments to the right and left at each landing. Their identical doors meant it took some time to find the family we were looking for. Finally, our acquaintance appeared and welcomed us into her home. It was immediately obvious that the apartment was more spacious and light than the homes in Bulaq but also probably hot in summer without the cool shade cast by buildings on either side of the narrow Bulaq streets.

I expected the residents to be appreciative of the more spacious housing, but instead, the women who gathered to see us offered a litany of complaints. The neighbors they had known intimately in their cul-de-sacs in Bulaq were scattered across the new complex, and with no front stoops, there was little chance to meet and visit informally with neighbors. The more serious complaint was that the men couldn’t find work so far out of the city. In Bulaq, it had been a matter of minutes to find pick-up jobs as porters in the railway station or at office buildings in downtown Cairo. Nothing like that existed in the new area, and the cost of commuting downtown was so high there would have been few earnings left.

The years after 1981 were ones I only witnessed indirectly. Increasingly Ansaf told me stories of the deteriorating situation of Christians in Bulaq—incidents where Muslims approached Christians and tried to talk them into converting or offered jobs if they would convert. Ansaf told of specific instances where Muslim men visited Christian families asking to marry their daughters. She also remarked on the increasing numbers of young Muslim men from Bulaq who were becoming radicalized during their studies in secondary schools and universities—a trend that was apparent in Egypt as a whole. At first, I took these stories as overheated Christian rhetoric that, although strange coming from Ansaf, might be her way of telling me the news. She told these stories hesitantly, as if she didn’t want to relate bad news. I remember thinking that her usual openness toward Muslims seemed to be changing.

As long as the center continued to function as before, I tried to time my annual visits to attend religious service on Wednesdays where in one place, I could see many of the women I had known. But eventually a year came when Ansaf told me she couldn’t take me to Bulaq anymore for safety reasons—“It’s too dangerous for a foreigner to walk there,” she said. About this time, she also reported that Christians no longer wore crosses in public because several had had them yanked from their necks. And I noticed that most lower-class Christians were wearing standard overdresses instead of the knee-length dresses of their rural villages, while many middle-class Christians began covering their

hair in public—in both cases so their Christian identities would be less obvious. These corroborating pieces of information suggested that the Islamic revival in Egypt had reached Bulaq in unprecedented ways.

The most important change for Bulaq Christians during the time leading up to the 2011 Uprising was the transfer of most of the center's activities to offices in the Episcopal Cathedral some distance away in Zamalek. When this happened, Ansaf's work began to wind down and eventually her main job was to conduct the religious services on Wednesdays. Fewer of the women attended because of the distance from Bulaq and also because some had moved to the apartments near the airport. For a time, Ansaf continued to make weekly visits to the families still living in Bulaq, but without her daily presence there, the most positive face of Christianity was gone from the quarter. By the end of the first decade in 2000, she was in her late seventies, and her ability to carry on the work had diminished and her prodigious memory for people and problems began to fade. It was only a matter of time, I felt, until there were few traces of center activities in Bulaq. Just as there had been little planning to improve the impact of center activities, there was little planning to sustain them in the future, nor had anyone thought of training a replacement for Ansaf as she grew older. Well before the Uprising, her work had slowed and yet for a time, the church out of respect continued to maintain the fiction that she was still in charge.

In subsequent years, I only visited Ansaf in her Zamalek office or her home in Gezirat Badran on the edge of Shubra where, as usual, she would bring me up to date on the news of families we had once visited. At some point, she would reach into her voluminous purse and take out a notebook in which she kept meticulous accounts of loans² she had given local residents and the dates when they repaid them. During the first years of the loan program, her repayment rate was close to 100 percent, but gradually the fund became smaller and smaller until the day came when there was nothing left. Ansaf, ever sympathetic to hard-luck stories, simply gave it all away. About this time when I reminded her of our days together and certain people we had known, she only had spotty recollections of them. She continued to go to the office every day and gave her sermons, but when she could no longer speak coherently, the old women of Bulaq came on Wednesdays to sit in a circle on the floor around her, holding her hand and hoping the contact would transfer blessings to them.

Brochures from the Episcopal Cathedral in Zamalek that I was given in 2013 stated that social services had resumed under the supervision of "Episocare"—an organization that had taken over the charitable activities of the Episcopal Church in Egypt. The pamphlet stated somewhat ambiguously, "Boulaq Community Development Centre serves approximately 1000 people per year, including women attending sawing [*sic*] and embroidery classes, people

participate in seminars, training, receiving micro-loans, etc. The centre welcomes everyone from the area without any kind of discrimination with respect to sex or religion. Because the centre is now located on Zamalek the beneficiaries receive bus money when coming to the centre.” The pamphlet went on to say that there were 12 full-time staff members and seven volunteers, although I had no way of verifying these facts or the activities they claimed to offer.

What I do know is that Rev. Aziz’s building on Ramses Street was long since sold to the neighboring *Al-Ahram* newspaper to expand its facilities, while our even older Welfare Center in the middle of Bulaq was condemned after an earthquake in 1993 made it unsafe. There were discussions about building a new center in Bulaq and that must have happened, since Ansaf’s family told me in 2014 that the center was reopened and was now called the “Ansaf Aziz Social Welfare Center.”

Ansaf passed away in March 2013. According to her family, a volunteer, Milad, who once conscientiously picked Ansaf up in his car in the mornings and called for her after work as she grew more feeble, took over her list of those she visited and, with other staff members, “followed in her footsteps” in Bulaq. It’s hard for me to imagine a man making visits to the families or becoming privy to the personal stories and needs of the people in Bulaq as Ansaf once did. Such trust and intimacy could only come after long-term acquaintance with the women.

An aura of sainthood is already growing around Ansaf. And while I agree that she was truly charismatic and exceptional, she was all the more so because she would have laughed at the exaggerated stories that now circulate about her. In a local suburban newspaper in Maadi,³ for example, a reporter writing about a charity bazaar said,

For years there was this old lady dressed in black sitting behind their table. What you might not know is that she is the founder of Boulaq center. Her name is Madame Ansaf. She started this center long ago (*Not true—she did not start the center*). As a young woman, she suffered from the fact that her husband couldn’t give her enough money for her household (*Ibrahim did not withhold money from her, but as all teachers, he had a small salary and she decided to work to help pay for the education of their four children*). She bravely decided to start sewing to make a little income of her own. When her kids grew up, she decided to encourage other women to create their own income. She started a community center in the middle of Boulaq (*she became a teacher at the center after it was already functioning*) and started to visit women and encourage them. She started a little workshop (*this was the work of Rev. Aziz’s wife*) to train women in embroidery and sewing. They could bring their finished items and she would try to sell them. At the same time she visited older widows (*and many others*) who did not have an income at all. She did all she could to support them. (*italics mine*)

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Geertz 1968, 4.
2. Egyptians call the events that came after January 25, 2011, the “revolution,” while internationally they are often known as the “Arab Spring.” There have been criticisms of both these names: “revolution,” because it is not clear that much has changed and “Arab Spring,” because it implies a summer, fall, and winter to follow. I am using the more neutral term “uprising.” For more on the term, see El-Amrani 2012, 194.
3. The Common Era or Christian Era is the term now used as an alternative to Anno Domini (AD).
4. See Abdenmour 2007, 12. In this book, I use the term “Christian” to apply to Copts as well as other denominations of Christianity in Egypt. The text specifies which brand of Christianity when important.
5. Up until the last two popes (Shenouda III and Tawadros II), popes had been elected out of the monastic tradition. The last two had been bishops or part of the clerical hierarchy.
6. Meinardus 1999, 54. For more on the history of the Coptic Church, also see Farag (2014), where she notes that the church no longer wants to be defined as Monophysite.
7. To Egyptians, “Arab” has the meaning of tribal and, in modern times, often refers to people who inhabit the Sinai and the Arabian Peninsulas. Gamal Abdul Nasser stretched the term when he supported Pan-Arabism to include all Arab speakers.
8. Wakin 1963, 8.
9. Meinardus 1970, 366–67.
10. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is referred to as the millet system.
11. Febe Armanios in Q and A on the history of Coptic leaders, *The Egypt Independent*, March 20, 2012.
12. That is, laws concerned with marriage, divorce, and child custody. Inheritance is a special case.
13. Hardy 1952, 195.
14. See Sharkey (2008) for a discussion of the impact of American missionary activity on the social, cultural, and political lives of Egyptians. She notes that the main converts were Copts from Upper Egypt and describes the bitter tensions that arose between Evangelicals and the Coptic Church. She also credits these tensions with providing the impetus for a revival of the Coptic Church (47). Others

- downplay tensions between the denominations and credit the leadership of Popes Cyril and Shenouda with reviving the Coptic Orthodox Church through their imitation of Protestant methods such as the Sunday School program.
15. Sedra (2011) tells how efforts to introduce children to modern education in the nineteenth century through American missionary schools had the unforeseen result of making them resistant to efforts to control their behavior and eventually led to new forms of political activism.
 16. This is taken from an interview with an elderly Coptic woman who felt it was more patriotic at the time to return to an indigenous Egyptian Church.
 17. Society was pretty much divided into two classes: the rich landed classes and the poor masses. As extended education became more common, graduates from lower-class families moved into the middle class. One of the main aims of Independence was to provide universal education.
 18. The number of Christians has been estimated from as little as 6 to as much as 16 percent. The disputed number claimed by Sadat in the 1976 Census was 6.3 at a time when the Coptic Church claimed 16 percent, although the Church refused to say how it came by these figures. Uwais (1959), using census data, says in the early 1950s, the number of Christians in Cairo was 14 percent. Since 2006, the Census no longer asked about religious affiliation, but it does appear on people's electronic ID cards.
 19. The most complete description of this period can be found in Tadros (2009). Here I only summarize the important events to set the national scene in the 1970s.
 20. The most important of these was the Majlis al-Milli that oversaw Coptic schools, endowments, and personal status courts. Before Independence, tensions existed between the Church and the Majlis al-Milli that were resolved in favor of the Church during the Nasser period when the court system was reformed and the Church took over the endowments (Tadros 2009, 270–71).
 21. Tadros 2009, 270–71.
 22. The Land Reform Law No. 178 of 1952 stated that landowners could not own more than 200 feddans (see note in Chapter 3 for details).
 23. The private schools of these organizations were not taken over but were required to conform to government curriculum and regulations. This, along with the opening of compulsory free government education, resulted in reduced demand for private schools.
 24. Graduates of private universities were not eligible for government jobs, thus eliminating better-trained graduates from mostly foreign-operated and Christian-established universities.
 25. This was over what the United States saw as Egypt's neutral stand during the Cold War and Nasser's anger when the United States refused to fund the Aswan Dam project.
 26. New church construction had to be approved personally by the president. Even when Sadat approved them however, the interior minister was often slow to issue the permits (Tadros 2009, 273).
 27. *Ibid.*, 273.

28. Guirguis (2012, 515) calls the period from 1971 to 1981 (basically the Sadat years) a time when Pope Shenouda was popular among Christians for challenging the regime.
29. The amendment was a trade-off for allowing Sadat to run for indefinite terms. This was not the first time that Copts' rights had been put in jeopardy. Their rights were also not clear or were limited in previous constitutions.
30. The pope forbade Christians from going to Israel because Israel had not returned the al-Sultan monastery. This was another contentious issue with Sadat who was trying to normalize tourism relations with Israel.
31. Meinardus 1999, 8.

Chapter 2

1. Lane-Poole 1918, 257.
2. Abu-Lughod 1971, 91.
3. Ibid., 59.
4. Ibid., 93.
5. See Uwais (1959).
6. The Nile no longer flooded Cairo after the Aswan Dam was completed in 1970, but from June through October, parts of Bulaq periodically filled with water, making the ground-level rooms of many houses virtual swamps.
7. Today it is a main thoroughfare of Cairo but once was a major causeway to the island of Bulaq.
8. Lunde (2008, 83) says, "In 1927 the CMS established their second infant welfare centre . . . in Bulaq, on the same preventative lines as the first and pioneering centre established in Old Cairo in 1921."
9. Bulaq Center pamphlet, n.d., 21.
10. See Lunde (2008).
11. Ibid., 26.
12. Ibid.
13. In 1956, Israel, with the support of the British and French, attacked Egypt in an effort to take over the Suez Canal after Nasser nationalized it. President Eisenhower pressured them to leave. But the strong feelings against the British in particular meant the Egyptian government nationalized their properties and forced many to leave.
14. Bulaq Center pamphlet, n.d., 18.

Chapter 3

1. Abu-Lughod 1971, 58.
2. Ibid., 59.
3. Ibid., 176n, 177n.
4. Bulaq Center members living in these Bulaq districts numbered 107 and 16, with a total of 38 living in the two Qulali districts and six from other districts.
5. One of the first acts of the Revolutionary Command Council after declaring Independence was to enact Law No. 178 in which it was stated that landowners

could not own more than 200 feddans (around 207 acres) or 300 if they had more than two children. Excess lands were expropriated by the government and sold to peasants in five-feddan parcels. The law also reduced the price charged to peasants who rented land. In 1961, the law was amended to reduce to 100 feddans the amount landowners could own. In the 1980s, Sadat curtailed and then abolished the law. The general verdict is that land reform benefited peasants that bought or worked the land but that as plots became fragmented through inheritance, farming became less efficient than the previous larger parcels. With more family-farmed lots, there was also less work for landless peasants who were then forced to migrate to places like Bulaq. In the end, only about 15 percent of the land under cultivation was redistributed.

6. Baer (1960, 218) says that as late as the twentieth century, about 98 percent of the tax collectors were Copts.
7. In the early 1960s, Nasser nationalized large parts of the industrial, financial, and economic sectors, and the government invested heavily in expanding these sectors. These jobs drew many from rural areas to cities like Cairo.
8. The government tried to place students in universities based on the specialties they qualified for and their home locations. This was an effort to prevent large numbers of students coming to Cairo and staying after graduation.
9. A reader of this manuscript noted that by 2015, it was no longer the case that Christians found it easier to live in towns like Assiut, presumably because of the growing influence of Muslims.
10. Sharkey 2008, 47.
11. The 2011 Uprising suggests that the subservience was only hidden, especially for workers who played such a major role in the protests that ousted President Mubarak.
12. An Egyptian American friend was admonished by an elderly shoemaker that she shouldn't speak so respectfully to people like him from the lower classes or they would take advantage of her, thinking she was a foreigner.

Chapter 4

1. For more details of class characteristics see Rugh (1979).
2. Coptic Christmas comes in January.
3. This stipend was discontinued while I was still visiting Bulaq and attendance dropped.
4. The numbers of registered members varied and so the figures may seem inconsistent, since they were collected over a five-year period.
5. This was the reverse of the historical trend of middle-class Christians being the first to take advantage of schooling.
6. Only the ages of living husbands were reported.
7. Nytrup 1976, 73. Longevity for men in Egypt was 51.6 years and for women was 53.8 years.
8. See Rugh (1981).
9. Two more families were added later in the fieldwork.

10. Uwais (1959), studying Bulaq two decades earlier using census data and interviews, found that 40 percent of the dwelling units in his sample were too old to install pipes for running water. Three-quarters of the residents were renters and roughly half paid LE 1 (at the time \$2.85) or less in rent a month.
11. The richer residents were skilled mechanics, plumbers, or electricians, or those selling used furniture or drugs.
12. At the time, university graduates were still guaranteed jobs in the government, albeit very low-paying ones.
13. Actually the numbers claiming charitable income should have been almost 100 percent. This either means they were embarrassed about accepting handouts or felt the amount was so negligible it was not worth mentioning. Some also may have been asked after the monthly stipend was discontinued.
14. Income from female children was probably an underrepresented category because of a reluctance to admit support from a married daughter.
15. Even factory work required minimum literacy.

Chapter 5

1. Antoun 1972, 120.
2. *Ibid.*, 120.
3. Schielke 2012, 306. This is one of the reasons it has been so difficult to talk about a secular state—secular in many people’s minds means against or without religion. In the lead-up to elections after the Uprising, those belonging to secular parties held up signs saying “Me too,” meaning they could still be Muslim even though not voting for religious-affiliated parties.
4. Uwais 1959.
5. The churches in the vicinity of the Bulaq Center are the Coptic Churches of St. Michael and St. George, both in Zahhar; St. Dimiana in Bulaq; Our Lady of Carmel, a Franciscan Church; the Qulali Coptic Evangelical Church; and the Greek Orthodox Church of Saints Constantine and Helena on the edge of Bulaq (catering to a small, more affluent clientele). In addition, on the edge of Bulaq are churches like the German Church, used primarily by foreigners, that appear to have been engulfed by lower-income areas while their members now live in distant parts of the city.
6. This was the most up-to-date published list at the time.
7. One aware young Episcopalian active in the church, when asked about the purposes of a place like the Bulaq Center, enumerated almost exactly the same points I make here.
8. The center for a time had a clinic that provided free birth-control materials, but this was eventually discontinued. The Church was not an advocate of preventing Christian births.
9. Meinardus 1970, 312.

Chapter 6

1. By “culture,” I mean a shared worldview that helps people make sense out of their world.
2. That is, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi’i and other schools for the Shi’a. In the thirteenth century, the “door to interpretation” was closed for Sunnis but left open for Shi’is, although of course, interpretations continued to change.
3. Shari’a codes in Egypt are applied mainly to laws affecting personal status and not the full range of jurisdictions, but observant Muslims may practice other Shari’a recommendations.
4. In one letter to an Egyptian newspaper, a woman asked, for example, if it was proper for her to undress in front of her male dog, and the sheikh said no. Another asked if she was responsible for men’s immoral thoughts if they smelled her perfume as she walked by and the sheikh said yes.
5. Bailey 1972, 38.
6. This emphasis on duty is an important difference from cultures that emphasize individuals’ rights. If one approaches others with a sense of the obligations owed them rather than the rights expected, it makes for a different kind of relationship.
7. See Rugh (1986) for more on this phenomenon.
8. One center member, describing her sources of income said, “I would rather eat bread and tomatoes (cheap items) from the money my son gives me than ask my married daughter for anything.”
9. A good example was children dropped off anonymously at a mosque or a Christian orphanage who were assumed to be products of illegitimate relationships. The taint of immorality tended to attach to these orphans, making it difficult for them to marry.
10. To be more accurate, relations between nonrelatives are of course also affected by age, sex, and role characteristics.
11. Springborg (1975) identifies these nonkin groups as ones Egyptians are most likely to maintain contact with.
12. After the 2011 Uprising, many of the more radical Salafists simply didn’t see a role for other religious groups in their vision for the new Egypt. As a result, they were no longer constrained by a desire to maintain “correct” relations with Christians. Nevertheless, by the parliamentary elections slated for 2015, the Salafist Nour Party announced it would include Christians and women on its slate.

Chapter 7

1. Early (1985) describes the range of one Bulaq woman’s network.
2. The literature describes how the segregation of women is more likely to be achieved among classes where enough resources are available to pay for the clothing, services, chaperones, and cars that would be required.
3. Webber (1985, 311) distinguishes between fantasy stories (*khurafah*) and true stories (*hikayya*) in Middle Eastern culture. As women become more involved in public, they tend to tell true stories in objectifying and evaluating their

experiences. The Bulaq women tend to mix the two, presenting their tales as though they are true but embellishing them often in ways that makes them fanciful.

4. Rugh 1984, 164.

Chapter 8

1. Shadid 2005, 12.

Chapter 9

1. Bylaws promulgated in 1938 allowed Coptic Christians to divorce under certain conditions, such as if a spouse (1) attempted murder, (2) was remanded to prison for seven years or more, (3) abandoned the spouse for five or more years, (4) had refused sex for three years, (5) was chronically ill, (6) was insane for three or more years, (7) was dysfunctional sexually, or (8) the couple had irreconcilable differences and a few other conditions. In 2008, Pope Shenouda III reduced the conditions for Copts to adultery, conversion to Islam, or another Christian denomination. In 2012 after the Revolution, a group, Coptic 38, called for returning to the more flexible 1938 rules of divorce.
2. Education figures collected in the late 1970s showed that girls in the most affluent suburbs and girls in the poorest urban areas had the lowest school enrollment rates. This was partly because affluent parents provided private tutors.
3. For the details of engagement contracts and practices, see Meinardus (1970, 282).
4. See Fox 1977, 805–11.
5. Ibid.
6. About this time after the 1967 War, the fashion for women was becoming more modest “Islamic” dress. This was advantageous for those Muslim girls in Bulaq who were transitioning to middle-class status through university study. Rather than wearing the “educated” dress of the middle classes during the early 1960s, which often meant short skirts and other Western style clothing, the Islamic dress covered the same areas of the body as traditional rural dress worn by women in Bulaq and yet the dress differed enough not to be confused with lower-class styles. The girls could appear modest to their neighbors while still identifying themselves as educated (for more, see Rugh [1984] on symbols of dress).
7. Since laws should be authentic, many seek religious justification for them whether true or not.
8. Numbers vary a lot but are usually around 80 to 90 percent. President Morsy during his tenure announced that the operation would be free in villages, and presumably the number of operations increased. A prominent human rights activist, Moushira Khattab, claimed the proportion of women who had had the operation was closer to 66 percent (talk at the Wilson Center, February 10, 2015), but this number seems very low.
9. The practice is said to date back to the pharaohs and is a traditional rather than a religious practice. Others say it was originally an African practice. A UN report

- (2005) estimated that 97 percent of Egyptian females between 15 and 49 had been circumcised.
10. Once, Ansaf entertained guests to meet a distant relative of hers from a rural village. The girl was attractive and had completed university. She was wearing slacks, and the man's mother said she would have to see her in a skirt before deciding if she was good marriage material. So the mother and son returned a second time but, in the end, rejected her as being too thin.
 11. LE 10 was what I observed several times. In those days, it was a substantial sum.
 12. See Meinardus (1970, 283) for the details of the marriage sacrament.
 13. Even Muslim nations like Morocco that reformed their family laws felt inheritance could not be changed "because it was so clearly specified in the Koran." Nonetheless, up to one-third of an estate could be bequeathed independently outside the normal quotas.
 14. Adoption is prohibited in Islam, so I don't know what she meant by this statement. All he could do would be to set aside a portion of his money and property before his death.
 15. The children, being Muslim, could not inherit from their mother who was Christian.
 16. In Arabic, people specify relationships in this way by detailing the precise links. There is no equivalent for the English word "uncle," which in English refers to a composite group of relationships on both the mother's and father's sides.
 17. Altogether, the urban and rural cases numbered 179. In seven cases where a dual relationship existed, each relationship was counted separately. In three cases, the relationships were unknown or doubtful and so were omitted. Making these adjustments, the total number of cases was 172.
 18. The Arab proverb "The death of the wife means a new wedding" expresses the belief that men will quickly seek a new wife.
 19. I don't remember a marriage of this kind among the members of the center but was told that they were common among Christian families.

Chapter 10

1. The last complete census that was available was from 1976.
2. Baer (1969, 218) states that in small towns, segregation by religious affiliation was common. However, Copts overwhelmingly lived in mixed villages even in the nineteenth century. In 1897 and 1907, only 12 villages had fewer than 10 Muslims in all of Egypt, although Copts and Muslims tended to live in separate quarters of villages.
3. Apparently this was true although the impact of land reform differed and was never fully implemented. Large landowners managed to retain much of their land through different strategies, foremost among them being to register the land in the name of various household members. Sometimes it was only necessary to bribe a willing official.
4. It should be noted that one of the important sources of conflict was water. Water flows through smaller and smaller channels to the field level. At various points, guards open gates for designated periods and often can be bribed to increase the

time for one farmer at the expense of another. Each farmer must keep his channel cleared so water can move to fields beyond his. Since the laws of inheritance divide fields among relatives, conflicts about water are usually solved within families, but when divided by land reform, the potential for conflicts among nonrelatives increased. If the people in conflict over water rights were from different faiths, the problem often escalated into a Muslim-Christian issue.

5. Bailey 1972, 37.
6. For the best description of Muslim family law, see Esposito (1982).
7. Guaranteed confessional representation in the legislature was also abolished in 1955 (Betts 1978, 169).
8. Sfeir (1956, 248) says that, in a law enacted on September 21, 1955, Muslim *qadis* (judges) were empowered to sit on benches of the civil courts hearing personal-status cases but no such provisions were made for non-Muslims. See also Safran (1958) on the abolition of personal-status courts.
9. This law said that anyone who left Islam should be executed.
10. Hadiths detail the practices and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.
11. *Egyptian Gazette*, August 11, 1977, 2.
12. This is not exactly accurate. Abraham had two wives, Sara and Hagar. Sara's son, Isaac, was thought to be the progenitor of the Jews and subsequently the Christians. Hagar, forced into exile with her son, Ismail, became the mother of the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula who later came to Egypt during the Muslim Conquest.
13. Guirguis and Van Doorn-Harder (2001) state that as late as the 1980s, in most villages, if a Copt was asked to recite the Lord's Prayer, he or she would recite the first chapter of the Koran believing it to be part of his own faith.
14. There are other differences not discussed here, such as different calendars—the Islamic, which tends to set religious festivals, and the Coptic, which is used by all farmers for agricultural purposes. Most Egyptians abide by the Western calendar for official business.
15. I realize these are my own observations and might be rejected by religious authorities.
16. Guirguis (2012) points out that while Christian peasants living in Upper Egypt may not even know the difference between formal Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices, urban Christians would have more experience with the differences.
17. In most cases, I have focused on Coptic practices, since virtually all the Christians in Bulaq were Copts. Mme Ansaf, although herself Protestant, accommodated Coptic beliefs when talking with local Christians.
18. See Hanna (1963, 56–57) for a full description of the canonical sacraments.
19. See Galwash (1973, 8) for details about the times and purposes of prayers.
20. See Murad (1968, 31) for more details about these prayers.
21. See Abdenmour (2007, 83–86) for specific Coptic fasting periods.
22. Murad 1968, 28.
23. As noted earlier, Copts prefer not to be referred to as Christians because they think of themselves as original Egyptians and don't want themselves to be confused with later Christian interlopers.

Chapter 11

1. It can't be stressed enough that dress is not an infallible indicator of a person's beliefs or even of their piety. It certainly does not necessarily indicate oppression or docility. Some of the most active protestors during the Uprising and after were women who were fully covered in the Islamic style (see Wright 2011). An Egyptian psychiatrist once told me that of his patients, some of the worst violators of sexual norms were fully covered women.
2. Simply following the details of dress through these years and up to the present shows the changing mind-set of Egyptians. The increasing use of the *zeyy Islami*, or Islamic dress, that both men and women wear was at first motivated more by belief and then, for some Egyptians, more for reasons of fashion and protecting themselves from harassment in public places. It is hard, for example, to reconcile tight-fitting jeans and tops worn with head scarves as signifying modesty or piety. By 2013, even the black garments had taken a new twist with a pristine white version for summer. After the Uprising, it was frequently possible to identify categories of men through dress, including liberal party activists (crisp Western-style pants and shirts), Muslim brothers (the same dress but adding trimmed beards or Iranian-style four o'clock shadows), and Salafis wearing pajama-style outfits with pant legs stopping above the ankles, skull caps, and long, scruffy beards.
3. See Rugh (1986) for how dress details show regional and other identities.
4. Usually families are identified by the name of the male head of household. Only prominent families in the village carry a family name that remains invariable over generations.
5. In other parts of the Middle East, these names identify the opposite group or are used by either without specifying.
6. See Meinardus (1970, 10–14) for a list of common Coptic names. In an updated book, Meinardus (1999) lists 134 names commonly used by Copts and 115 that could be either Christian or Muslim. A friend with an ambiguous name said she was always asked her religious affiliation.
7. Another woman disagreed, saying Christians never gave children Turkish names because of the Muslim connotations. Perhaps here she meant "Arabic" tribal names.
8. Abdenmour 2007, 26.
9. Conservative Muslims may object to Christians using this greeting.
10. As a greater fundamentalism appeared among Muslims during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Christians sometimes removed these symbols from sight when they were in public.
11. Like the rest of the women in Bulaq, we knew roughly by the dress whether a woman was a Muslim or a Christian. Christians tended to wear Upper Egyptian dress and Muslims the dress of the Delta.

Chapter 12

1. Interestingly, Unni Wikan (1980, 16), in describing the 17 Coptic and Muslim families she studied in Bulaq, says, "There is little in their life style to separate

- them [Copts] from the Moslems,” and indeed, perhaps there is not from an outsider’s perspective.
2. One implication of different views of marriage was the different amounts lower-class Christians and Muslims in Bulaq invested in marriage. On average in Bulaq, a Muslim male contributed LE 250 and a Muslim woman LE 350 to marriage expenses and a dowry that was supposed to revert to her and her family on divorce. The families of a Christian bride and groom each contributed roughly LE 250 that went into their common household account. Without the possibility of divorce, there was no need to consider women’s support if the household broke up as with Muslim families who demanded security for their daughters if such should be the case.
 3. The law in Egypt changed in 2000 to give women the right of automatic divorce if they would give up their right to the “alimony” portion of the dowry and return the part paid at marriage. Several young women told me in 2014 that the divorce rate was soaring (67 percent). Among their university-educated friends, they said a number married just after university and then, in a year or two, divorced “because it was better to be a divorced woman than never to have married at all.” After divorce, they had more freedom compared to unmarried women, and it was not difficult to marry again when they met the right person. These were, of course, not women of the lower classes but ones affluent enough to pay back the dowry money.
 4. Wakin 1963, 49.
 5. Meinardus 1970, 367.
 6. Although not discussed here, up until 1967, police would return home runaway wives of either faith “as long as the husband was providing for them.”
 7. Reported in Betts (1978, 136).
 8. See Meinardus (1970, 284) for more information on the grounds for divorce.
 9. Girgous and Van Doorn-Harder 2011, 184.
 10. In 2014 with the advent of a new pope, many lay Copts hoped to restore the more numerous grounds for divorce.
 11. Meinardus (1970, 368) says that even if a Christian becomes a Muslim and then converts back to Christianity, he or she will be treated as though dead by relatives and the Christian community. Sometimes, in order to accept the individual again, a rite is performed that is similar to one used when someone is restored to health (after a serious illness).
 12. There were 173 orphanages reported in Egypt in the 1960s: five that were foreign supported, 85 that were Christian, 14 that were Muslim, and 69 that were “general.” This was half the number reported in the previous two decades.
 13. See Rugh (1981).

Chapter 13

1. This was brought home to me while listening to a class of Egyptian university students discussing their negative impressions of Thoreau’s book *On Walden Pond*: “He’s totally the opposite of what we Egyptians admire in a person. He’s stingy when he counts every penny he spends on making his cabin; he’s antisocial

living alone like that; and what about his family—how does his living in the woods benefit them?”

2. In a study comparing Bulaq and the Boston suburb of Roxbury, he notes that in Bulaq, because of the stress on persons as the most potentially threatening, crimes of the person are more common than those against property as is the case in Roxbury.
3. Uwais 1959, 440.
4. Spiro 1965, 106.
5. Meinardus (1970, 264, 269) describes the details of the miracle of Zeitoun and another miracle that occurred about the same time in Shubra.
6. See Morsy (1978) for an exploration of the relation between illness and sex roles in a Lower Egyptian village. She speaks of a sickness called *usr*, which “offers a legitimate channel for temporary enhancement of social position, and deviation from established norms” (614).
7. See el-Shamy (1972) for a discussion of mental health in traditional societies.
8. Many of the women in Bulaq belonged to *gama'iyyas* where on a regular basis—weekly or monthly—all members paid an agreed-on amount and took turns taking the total. This is probably how these women secured such a large sum.
9. Official Islam does not support idol worship or supernatural powers in the same way the Christian Church propounds the divinity of Christ and the supernatural powers of saints. This does not however keep Muslims from visiting tombs and special mosques like the Sayyida Zeinab mosque in Cairo where they believe there is a special power.

Chapter 14

1. See Hoffman (1995) for descriptions of related phenomenon.
2. See Nelson (1971) for a discussion of spirit possession and its relation to sense of self and worldview.
3. I call them spirits in most of this chapter to accommodate the Muslim view that they can be good and bad. Christians would probably see them more as demons in the negative sense.
4. Meinardus (1999) notes also the passage of the “man with an unclean spirit” (Mark 1:23–28)
5. In one widely distributed book on Islam, the author stated that the Koran and the Hadith “do not speak of the jinn as they exist in the popular imagination, interfering in human affairs or controlling the forces of nature or assuming human or any other form or taking possession of men or women and affecting them with certain diseases” (Ali, n.d., 194). He attributes these ideas to the Bible. Jinns, he says, function “to excite evil passions and low desires” (189). Jinns are a hindrance to an advancement to a higher life when they run riot and get out of control. The Prophet explained that he also had a jinn but that God helped him overcome it. After that, instead of making evil suggestions, the jinn became a help to him in developing a better life (190).
6. Ali 1968, 147n.
7. Ibid., 1626n.

8. The long scarf is a feature of the Delta dress and is not usually worn by Christians in the south, which is the region of origin for most Bulaqi Christians.
9. Meinardus (1970, 225) notes that the majority of healings occur in the annual Coptic *mawalids*, feasts in honor of the Virgin Mary or other saints. This Bulaq study, however, only looks at the neighborhood opportunities for dealing with spirit possession.
10. This information on mosque ceremonies comes from John Mason, an anthropologist, who has studied devil-possession ceremonies.
11. Meinardus (1999) says the majority of healings of demon possession occur at Coptic *mulids* by officiating priests. He notes that many illnesses are still attributed to demon possession, and the methods used in exorcism are very similar to those described in the Bible.
12. Meinardus (1999, 103) notes that the main objection to exorcism by psychotherapists is that it treats the symptoms and not the causes of the possession.
13. One priest, I was told, was ordered by the pope to discontinue exorcism ceremonies because they attracted so many Muslims that Muslim officials became concerned.
14. Meinardus (1970, 219) describes Muslim attendance at Christian folk religious events.
15. In the *zar* too, the distinguishing feature of the possession is the jarring, jolting, spasmodic character of the possessed person's movements, which contrasts with the fluid, regular motions of Arab dance.
16. Knowledge of a person's name in Egyptian society is believed to give power over that person. Meinardus (1970, 230) believes one source of this belief may be Genesis 32, 27ff.
17. Meinardus (1999, 103) says the laying on of the hands has sacramental value, especially when the soul has become disconnected from God.
18. Meinardus (1970, 271–79) notes that Copts make no distinction between the qualities of an icon and the person it represents. Thus icons of saints are believed to have superhuman powers. Many churches still have relics of saints.
19. Strangely, it was this communication between the two spirits that convinced my companion that these women were truly possessed. "See the spirits know each other so that proves they were once together in the mother," she said.
20. Meinardus 1970, 231.
21. Fakhouri (1968) and Kennedy (1967) also discuss the *zar* in Egypt.
22. I have not attended these *zars* and am not familiar with the procedures. People told me they are more often held in middle-class areas because of the high cost of providing a sheep and other food to resolve the problem of a single possessed individual.
23. Sidqi, Al-Ahram March 27, 1977:3.
24. In Bulaq, it may cost as much as LE 100 or more (\$140), which was a princely sum at that time.
25. Mayeur-Jaouen (2012, 169), in talking about Christian *mulids*, says neither Christians nor Muslims want to mix anymore at one another's rites or celebrations. This avoidance may also be occurring in exorcisms and with visits to informal Christian practitioners.

Chapter 15

1. Fernea 1969, 185.
2. Geertz 1968, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 95.
4. When the government suddenly raised the price of flour and bakers refused to bake bread, crowds of people took to the streets in Bulaq to protest, and the government quickly restored subsidies.

Chapter 16

1. For a more complete description of Copts during the Mubarak era, see Elsasser (2014) and Hasan (2003).
2. Tadros (2009, 275) says that as part of the entente, Pope Shenouda seems also to have stopped using American Copts to push his agenda, an act that had infuriated Sadat.
3. *Ibid.*, 277.
4. Asad 2012.
5. See Tadros (2013).
6. Tadros 2009, 279.
7. *Ibid.*, 278–81.
8. Stephanous (2010) compares the Coptic Orthodox and Maronite Churches of Egypt and Lebanon and concludes that the Coptic Church is an ineffective political voice for the Copts compared to the Maronite Church in Lebanon (115).
9. Tadros 2009, 278.
10. Hasan (2003) gives more detail of the Shenouda period generally, Elnasser (2014) examines the Shenouda-Mubarak relationship, and Van Doorn-Harder (2005) describes the early 2000s. Oram (2004) describes boundary development in a mixed neighborhood of Cairo in the 1990s.
11. Although young people stood out during the Uprising, protestors also included middle-aged and older Egyptians, both male and female. The groups that were least represented were those from the rural countryside and the urban poor, even though their situation had deteriorated under Mubarak (Asad 2012).
12. Some still insist that Coptic Christians see themselves as Egyptians first and Christians second, but that was not my experience in Bulaq. For one example of this view, see Ibrahim (2011).
13. Evangelicals include “Protestants,” the term usually applied to the branch of Christianity that derived from the missionary activity of American missionaries.
14. Guirguis 2012.
15. *Ibid.*, 512–14.
16. *Ibid.*, 529.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Armanios and Amstutz (2013) analyzed Christian videos put out during Shenouda’s tenure (1971–2012) and found they reflected the Church’s increasing anxiety about women’s modesty, lack of submissiveness and obedience, and their desire to choose their own marriage partners and to be treated equally in the church.

19. Past popes were usually selected from monastic backgrounds, while Pope Shenouda III and Tawadros II came from the clergy.
20. One of the demands of the laity was for the new pope to revert to earlier, looser interpretations of the divorce law. The aim was to allow Christians in abusive marriages to divorce without having to convert to Islam to do so. One group of Copts called "Right to Live" wanted a couple to be able to divorce if both agreed and then be able to remarry without a permit from the Church (*Al-Ahram* <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2011/1057/eg9.htm>).
21. Kirkpatrick 2012.
22. For the full document, by the Office of Ahmed El-Tayyeb, Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, see *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs: Special Report; Egypt Today and Tomorrow*, 6/Summer 2012. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press (207–10). The document approves a set of general principles and regulations including various freedoms, such as belief, opinion and expression, scientific research, and literary and artistic creativity. It notes Koranic verses that there should be no compulsion in religion. Although several sections would apply equally to Copts, there are no specific references to them.
23. There were other important elements in the document relating to an independent role and financing for Al-Azhar and for the election of its Grand Sheikh rather than through the current system of the president appointing him.
24. Shahine 2011.
25. One might say that the 2014 constitution, with its wording "principles of . . .," reflected values agreed to at the Al-Azhar meeting as being common to all religions and that their meaning as interpreted by the Supreme Constitutional Committee conformed with the group's call for a civil state.
26. Tadros (2013) says sectarian incidents doubled in 2011 and 2012 and anti-Christian rhetoric proliferated in public. She says the Islamization of public space that started in Sadat's time came to the surface in the elections of 2011 and 2012.
27. Kirkpatrick 2011a.
28. However, at a UN conference during Morsy's tenure, the Egyptian representative surprised the delegates by voting for a document setting global standards to combat violence against women, a measure that conservative Muslim and Catholic states had attempted to block (*Egyptian Gazette*, March 18, 2013).
29. Armanios (2012, 66) says Morsy's Salafi supporters were against this proposal and called for a *jizya* tax to be imposed on non-Muslims.
30. Coptic Americans, for example, played a critical role in financing television and radio programs in Egypt that encouraged fundamentalist views both before and after the 2011 Uprising. Estimates of the number of Egyptian Copts living in the United States range from 450,000 to a million, with the higher number from Church sources. Most of their migration took place starting in the mid-twentieth century after Egypt's Independence in 1952, with another wave in 1967 after the Six Day War. There were two Coptic Churches in the United States in 1971 but now there are more than 200.
31. The Vatican estimate put the number at 100,000 (Douthat 2001).
32. The other point of view that runs contrary to the conventional story was that Morsy made efforts to be more inclusive but was rebuffed and that claims of his

- lack of inclusivity was part of the propaganda of the counterrevolution. Sawiris, for example, admitted having been offered a ministerial position or a position as the governor of Cairo, but he declined. Munir Fakhry Abdel Nour, another Copt, was also offered a ministerial position but also declined. Samir Morqus was appointed assistant to President Morsy but resigned with other assistants later. According to one observer, Morsy's "biggest mistake was not that he didn't try, but that he did not try hard enough."
33. Another consequence of Morsy's tenure was the dramatic rise in blasphemy cases lodged against Christians for insulting Islam. Most of the time, the accused were found guilty and given prison terms (Hubbard and El Sheikh 2013).
 34. Previously, the West had been accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. No matter what Western embassies said or did, they were blamed by both sides for events that occurred since the Uprising.
 35. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) said that at least 25 churches were torched and Christian schools, shops, and homes across all 27 provinces of Egypt were destroyed.
 36. <http://www.foxnews.com/egyptian-military-chief-vows-to-rebuild-coptic-churches.8/16/13>.
 37. Amira Mikhail, "Yesterday an Enemy, Today a Friend?," *AmiraMikhail* (blog), March 18, 2014, <https://nilerevolt.wordpress.com/2014/03/18>.
 38. The reforms in fact were felt less by the poor than previous reforms because of the government's system of Smart Cards and the rationing of commodities such as bread rather than across-the-board price hikes.
 39. For an example from Fayoum, see Hauslohner (2014).
 40. Makari (2007) has a very different story to tell. He examines the rhetoric and actions of government and religious leaders during the Sadat and Mubarak periods and concludes that there was a high level of interreligious cooperation and tolerance. As noted in the previous pages, expansive rhetoric on "how everyone gets along" was the standard response to even the slightest whiff of unpleasantness between Muslims and Christians, so it is not surprising for official statements to be full of such phrases, even when the truth lies otherwise.
 41. Al-Sisi's interim president Adly Mansour endeared himself to Christians when, on the occasion of Christmas, he made a visit to the Coptic Cathedral. Previously, such visits had been made by lower-level officials if at all. Similarly, President al-Sisi called on the pope to offer condolences when 21 Christians were beheaded by extremists in Libya in 2015.

Chapter 17

1. See Rutherford (2006).
2. Since parents in Bulaq are usually called "Um So-and-So" or "Abu So-and-So" after their eldest son, it means that giving an ambiguous name to a child also extends the protection of religious anonymity to parents in urban areas where people are not well known.
3. Shenoda (2011) notes that the prayers were Protestant and not Coptic. Armanios (2012, 67) says one church in particular—Kasr Al-Dobara, an Evangelical

(Protestant) Church located near Tahrir Square—was active throughout the protests, serving, for example, as a make-shift hospital for the wounded, and Evangelicals also appeared more frequently on satellite channels calling for national unity (67).

4. We now know that women and Christians who were to be the bellwethers of the democratic transition in the minds of liberal activists were quickly marginalized in the Morsy government and given very little representation in the committee to write the new constitution. The women's movement, however, got a boost from the Uprising in the sense that it became a much more grassroots movement with members from all classes and groups rather than organized from the top through the wives of presidents. Several women leaders told me that although their position deteriorated under SCAF and Morsy, they felt their stronger base would allow for slow, more secure gains in the future.
5. Armanios (2012) notes that lay Copts were already becoming restive before the Uprising, in particular in January 2011, when a car bomb went off at a Coptic Church in Alexandria and Copts battled police forces there and in Cairo.
6. Other reports said it was to protest the burning of a church in Helwan. In this particular case, the incident that set off the conflict was reputed to be the romance between a Christian man and a Muslim woman. Another case that caused sectarian conflict involved a priest's wife who Muslims said converted to Islam and was being held against her will by the church.
7. Kirkpatrick 2011a and *NYT*, October 10, 2011b. "Rage at Military in Egypt Fuels Deadly Protest."
8. Shenoda (2013) describes these events and suggests that the Maspero event and a march commemorating the martyrs a month later were evidence of a new boldness coming out of Christian involvement in the 2011 Uprising. Carrying church symbols publically, he says, is hazardous because it points out the differences between Christians and Muslims, although their intent may be intended to communicate with God and not Muslims.
9. Asad (2012, 289) notes that Maspero was never described as "the use of brutal force by soldiers against defenceless civilians," even though some Muslims joined in the protests. He says the event renewed the call for a secular constitution as necessary for the state to protect its citizens.
10. This occurred on March 17, 2012.
11. Al-Sisi seemed to have been taken by surprise by the burnings and reacted slowly, but eventually he reassured Christians that he would protect them and their properties, sending the army to rebuild some of the destroyed churches.
12. Fahim 2013.
13. Sedra (1999) is quoted in Asad (2012, 284).
14. This was not a new strategy. In the Revolution of 1919, Christians (both lay and clerical) and Muslims collaborated against the British. In the 1952 Revolution, the Church was still weak and the laity were more active (Armanios 2012).
15. Shenoda 2011, available at [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1624/reflections-on-the-\(in\)visibility-of-copts-in-egypt](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1624/reflections-on-the-(in)visibility-of-copts-in-egypt).
16. Asad (2012) suggests that the sectarian problem is not so much religion as it is a state that classifies some of its citizens as a legally privileged majority and others

- as a legally protected minority. He says this identifies the former fully with the nation and the latter only indirectly so. And he says this is institutionalized in the constitution (290).
17. Heo (2013) describes a 2009 appearance of the Virgin in Giza as a “contested image of divine intercession among Christians and Muslims.”
 18. Before the tendency to homogenize dress by class, regional patterns were apparent in the dress of the lower classes, suggesting among other identifications, one with specific geographical locations (see Rugh 1986).
 19. Guirguis 2012, 521, italics mine.
 20. Ibid., 524.
 21. Rumors surfaced that the Copts were planning to break off from Egypt and form a state of their own in Upper Egypt.
 22. Mayton 2013, 44, 46.
 23. Stephanous (2010) argues that the greatest hope for Arab Christians is the development of civil society.
 24. See Schielke (2012) for a discussion of Egyptians seeing themselves more as coming from an Islamic culture than believing in the tenets of the religion.
 25. “Secular” is used here in the English meaning rather than the Arabic one, which often conveys the meaning of being against religion or amoral.
 26. Khatib and Lust (2014) maintain that it was a wide range of actors and not just tech-savvy young people driving the Uprising. Cole (2014), however, describes Generation Y in the Middle East (including women) as being less obedient, more critical, more pragmatic in focusing on their goals, and networking more to share ideas than the previous generation.

Epilogue

1. Other reports, which are not incompatible, said President Sadat wanted to make Bulaq a business area as part of his private-sector development plan.
2. I brought her the money from funds I gathered to start the loan project. It was my last effort as I was leaving to shift the emphasis from charity to investment in income-producing activities.
3. Trix Van Leeuwen, “What Is behind That Charity Vendors’ Table?,” *The Maadi Messenger*, Christmas 2012.

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